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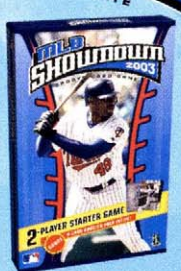

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DRAGON (USPS 318-790) is published monthly by Paizo Publishing, LLC, 3245 146th Place SE, Suite 110, Bellevue, WA 98007, United States of America. (ISSN# 1062-2101) Periodicals Postage Paid at Bellevue, WA, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO
Dragon, P.O. Box 469107, Escondido, CA 92046.
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DISTRIBUTION: National and international distribution is provided by Curtis Circulation Company, 730 River Road, New Milford, NJ 07646. Tel: (201) 634-7400. Fax: (201) 634-7499.

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A dire ferret, a job well done, and a half-black-dragon troll death knight.

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16 House Rules

ON THE COVER

Wayne Reynolds, one of *DRAGON'S* favorites, is back again with an incredible depiction of a rogue in his element.

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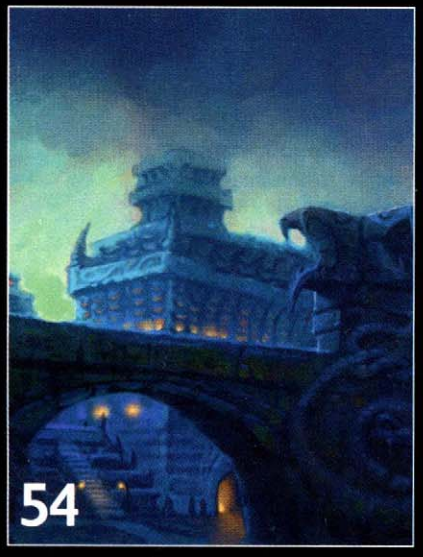

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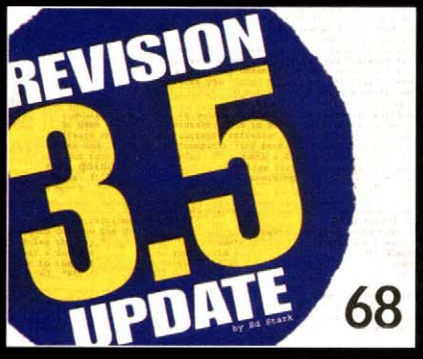


WIN A 5-SIDED DIE!

In issue #303, we offered to send one of the 5-sided dice developed by Gamescience to a person with the most creative use for a 5-sided die. At least, that's what we meant to say. Even though the entry clearly read "Win a 5-Sided Die," contest entrants might have interpreted the "Dragon Talk" item to say that anyone who sends in an idea would receive a 5-sided die. We see that it could be interpreted that way, and we intend to honor that interpretation while supplies last. Unfortunately, our supplies consist of a grand total of 11 5-sided dice—and that's after we emptied our own dice bags.

HOUSE RULES

If you think an average gamer has a lot of house rules, then you haven't met enough game designers. In this issue, we kick off a new column designed to bring you a few of the house rules of the pickiest DMs and players in the world. The first few installments of the column are all written by Andy Collins, a senior designer at Wizards of the Coast, and soon other designers and editors from roleplaying R&D will drop by to share the variants they use in their home game. In addition to presenting the variants, each of the designers will take a little bit of time to explain why they like the variant and the pros and cons of including it in a game.

STREET FIGHT!

This month's poster is ambitious to say the least. You've probably already noticed that it's bigger than our usual posters. Although urban adventuring is pretty common these days, good miniature-scale maps of urban areas are relatively rare. If you're the kind of D&D player that enjoys a good street fight, check out the map in issue #97 of *Dungeon* and a third section in the next issue of *Dragon*. At miniature scale, that's over 435 feet of street-fighting goodness.

WYRM'S TURN
FROM THE EDITOR

Like many D&D players, I spent a good chunk of last November absorbing the 4-disc Collector's Edition DVD of *The Fellowship of the Rings*, especially the great supplemental material about making the film. The extended version was stunning, to say the least, and the behind-the-scenes footage left me wishing I had been able to work on the films. I was particularly fascinated by the work of the artists, art directors, set designers, and others who built the movie's visuals—whether conceptual drawings, full scale sets, miniatures, computer generated images, or some mix of the lot.

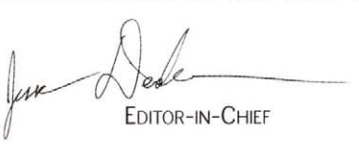
When I DM, I want the players to see the world, to know its inhabitants, and to feel a depth of culture and history behind the events of the campaign. While those responsible for the design of the film were talking about their painstaking work on even the smallest aspects of set and costume design, I couldn't help but think that they were expressing exactly what I want players to feel when walking in a world of my creation. Now, I don't think for a moment that the guys here in the office are going to be able to see the sands of the gladiatorial arena in the same way that they can see the tower of Orthanc in Tolkein's novel or Jackson's film. However, I'm happy to have a chance to listen to those designers and artists who worked on the film talk about the tricks they used and then try to put them to use in a D&D campaign.

The experts on the film reiterate several times that culture is in details. This may sound simple, but on the film it meant massive amounts of work (work that as a viewer I can only guess at) to create a cup in Rivendell that looked like an *elvish* cup, to create pillars in Dwarrowdelf that looked like *dwarven* pillars, and of course to create holes in Hobbiton that looked like *hobbit* holes. Okay, so hundreds of thousands of hours of work, costs in millions, and similar resources are not the stuff D&D campaigns are made of. Still, there's a valuable lesson about description to be had from the seemingly simple statement that culture is in the details. Players respond to concise, consistent descriptions, and as DMs, we can, with just a few choice details, provide the hooks that let the players see the world their characters adventure through.

There are other tricks too. For example, miniatures lovers can overcome a great deal of description with a well-painted figure. Anyone with a few D&D books and a few copies of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* has dozens of art resources to draw upon. DMs here at Paizo show pictures of the NPCs and locations in their games whenever possible, letting the work of fantasy illustrators make our job of describing these details a bit easier.

The best way I've seen this done is to compile a quasi campaign scrapbook with the help of a color photocopier. Other DMs have had success building campaign websites that serve the same purpose, although they are sometimes harder to have on hand during play.

Success in such a vague area of the game is hard to measure, but if you've got a trick or technique for bringing consistency to the images in your campaign, write **scalemail@paizo.com**, and help out your fellow DMs.



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HUMOR AND HELLSPAWN

Devils, Demons, and Daemons
by Mike Mearls
Six in fire burned, six by reason spurned, and six from dust returned: Eighteen new evil outsiders invade your game.

8 Pages of Comics
by Phil Foglio, John Kovalic, Tony Moseley, Aaron Williams
This April's issue features eight pages of comic strip comedy. In addition to the flagship strips from Phil foglio, John Kovalic, and Aaron Williams, issue #306 features a mammoth "Zoogonia" by Tony Moseley, creator of "Zoogonia" and artist of each month's "Caption Contest."

3.5 Revision Update
by Ed Stark
See the future of D&D before it hits the shelves in the latest installment of this new column devoted to the showing you what changes the revision of the core rulebooks will bring.

Action Adventures
by J. D. Wiker
Swinging from chandeliers, prying open doors, and throwing horses; "Action Adventures" presents the rules for cinematic actions, simple tools, and all the crazy things PCs try and DMs scratch their heads over.

Temptation and Redemption
by Eric Cagle
Walk the road to redemption or the path to perdition with new rules and advice for playing a character trying to overcome a dark past.

Racial Templates
by Wil Upchurch
Whether you choose to make aquatic dwarves, night gnomes, arctic halflings, or cave elves, you can create unique campaigns and characters with racial templates. Modify the core races, make new monsters, and change the face of your game.

Killing Cousins
by Chris Thomasson
Red-dragon-riding githyanki wielding flickering silver swords can present a problem—a problem the githzerai can solve. "Killing Cousins" presents the "gith-attala," warbands of githzerai tasked with the destruction of githyanki and the disruption of their plans. With the new feats, new magic items, monstrous new allies, and the level progression for playing a githzerai in a 1st-level party presented in this article, you too can solve githyanki problems.

READERS TALK BACK
SCALE MAIL

Cantrips Make Wizards Cool

I have to applaud issue #302. I always stayed away from spellcasters, aside from clerics, because they all seemed the same: dime-a-dozen weaklings. Upon seeing that the next issue was going to be magic-themed, I groaned. "Great," says I, "An entire issue of magic. What a waste." When the dreaded issue finally arrived, I skimmed through and stopped at the cantrip article. I never realized how interesting magic users' backgrounds could be. The idea of having to create a cantrip to finish your magical education left me—reluctantly—giddy. Story and background are my favorite parts of D&D, and the magic issue prompted me to make my first mage character. The other problem I had with mages was physical vulnerability. Solution? "Arcane Armor." That article was awesome. I would use some of that stuff for my barbarians. Keep up the great work guys.

Justin Van Koughnett
Carrot Creek, Alberta

We love applause, so thanks. I'm also glad that you've seen the light as far as wizards go, play too many fighters and you'll end up like Sernett.

Jesse Decker
Editor-in-Chief

Ferret Free For All

Well met! I'm S'rissa from Rochester, New York. I have a question about issue #292. The cover has what looks like a giant ferret, but I have not been able to find any stats on a giant ferret or weasel. Is there somewhere I can find this information?

S'rissa Moonflower
Rochester, NY

We're here to serve. You'll find the dire weasel in the Monster Manual. *The statistics for the larger and more fearsome dire ferret appear below:*

Dire Ferret: CR 3; Large animal; HD 4d8+12; hp 30; Init +6; Spd 40 ft., climb 20 ft.; AC 18 (touch 15, flat-footed 12); BAB +3; Grap +11; Atk +8 melee (1d8+6, bite); Full Atk +8 melee (1d8+4, bite) and +1 melee (1d6+2, 2 claws); Face/Reach 5 ft. by 10 ft./5 ft.; SA Trip; SQ Scent; AL N; SV Fort +7, Ref +10, Will +3; Str 18, Dex 23, Con 16, Int 2, Wis 14, Cha 6.

Skills and Feats: *Climb +17, Listen +7, Spot +7; Weapon Finesse (bite).*

Special Attacks: *Trip (Ex): A dire ferret that hits with a bite attack can attempt to trip the opponent as a free action (see page 139 in the* Player's Handbook*) without making a touch attack or provoking an attack of opportunity. If the attempt fails, the opponent cannot react to trip the ferret.*

Matthew Sernett
Associate Editor

And Nightcrawler Too

Hello and congrats on another excellent *Dragon*! In the "Scalemail" section, I read that the rock group Weezer has a song that talks about D&D. Can you tell me the name of the song?

Gordan Knox
Address withheld

D&D is mentioned in the song "In the Garage" on Weezer's "blue album"—their self-titled debut album, not to be confused with their recent self-titled "green album." The song begins with the lyrics, "I've got the Dungeon Master's Guide. *I've got a 12-sided die."*

If you know of other pop-culture references to D&D, let us know! If we get enough, we might be able to print "The D&D Player's Guide to Pop Culture." If you know of a reference from a television series, please provide the name of the episode; The Simpsons *probably has at least half a dozen references, and we'd like to be able to point readers to particular episodes.*

Send the references you know of to **scalemail@paizo.com** *with the title "D&D Pop Culture."*

Matthew Sernett

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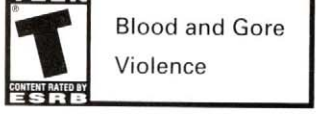

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Assurnabitashpi?

How do DMs get so caught up in books that they completely ignore other equally valuable sources of inspiration?

I present the computer game *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and its expansion, *Tribunal*. Sure, at first glance they look like more mindless, generic, first-person, I-have-more-guns-than-fingers bloodfests. I'm not a video gamer, but I complained too much about my wife's obsessive yammering (falling asleep nightly to her enthusiastic explanation of what her wood elf thief did that day), and one weekend she forced me to sit down and play it. I was drawn so deeply into it that it seemed like I wasn't playing a character; I was living another life. Three weeks later, I beat the game. I felt like my tropical island vacation was ending and it was time to go back to the salt mines.

What party wouldn't want to delve into ancient temple ruins named Assurnabitashpi in search of a legendary ring of wisdom that a demon lord forged for the Assassin Guild's patron? What DM could resist the temptation to integrate the dark elf wizard, Divayth Fyr, into his campaign setting? This guy is 4000 years old and so influential that he has a city named after him. Don't forget his harem of sarcastic, alchemically created bodyguard-concubines, his full suit of nearly invincible Daedric armor, and the summon implacable army spell (that anybody stupid enough to attack him witnessed first hand). What about the corpulent, spider-legged inventor, Yagrum Bagarn, the last living dwarf, who suffers from a terminal disease? How about that nerve-wracking jailbreak from the Ministry of Truth inside the floating asteroid that levitates hundreds of feet above the city of Vivec? And how cool were those three scrolls of Icarian flight?

I bet an issue devoted to *Morrowind* (similar to the Shannhara one you did a while ago) would go over quite well, be fairly simple to write (all the background info and art is already there), and well accepted by your readers.

Christopher Ferguson
Hanford, CA

"I complained too much about my wife's obsessive yammering."

I take it she doesn't read DRAGON?

Because if she does, I'm pretty sure you just solved that problem.

Now that you're single, you should play more D&D. Oh, and you'll probably be happy to know that we've got a Silicon Sorcery article devoted to Morrowind scheduled for an upcoming issue.

Jesse Decker

Max-Maxing

In issue #302, you asked the readers for ideas on how characters could become tainted. In my game, I had water become tainted by evil cultists in order for an evil deity to have an army waiting for him. The poison forced the townsfolk to take levels in the tainted prestige class when they failed their saves. Unlike most poisons though, the save is a Will save, and it continues to plague them until they have 10 levels in the tainted prestige class. The only problem I have encountered is that they usually don't meet the requirements to take levels in the tainted prestige class.

I was wondering if I could apply for a job as an intern at Wizards of the Coast. My uncles and dad were all original playtesters for D&D when Gary Gygax first came up with the idea. I am extremely creative: Once, I even won the *Tomb of Horrors*, which supposedly is impossible. My character was an unkillable, half-black-dragon troll death knight; all damage was subdual due to troll regeneration, half black dragon acid immunity, and death knight fire immunity. Plus, he was immune to turning and polymorphing. DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is my life, and I could not imagine a better life than working beside the legends on the most popular roleplaying game of the world.

Xander Malaby
Holmen, WI

At Least He's Honest

I love D&D, and I've been playing the same characters since 1988. However, I haven't transferred over to 3rd edition because I'm a bitter, set-in-my-ways, miserable, old codger. I'm currently DMing a 2nd edition campaign with 3rd edition players, and they keep scratching their heads in befuddled confusion. How can they not grasp THACo? I know zilch of 3rd edition because the tail end of books from 2nd (namely *Combat & Tactics* and *Skills & Powers*) scared the crap out of me. You could have a sword-wielding mage climbing walls in full plate who could also cast cleric spells

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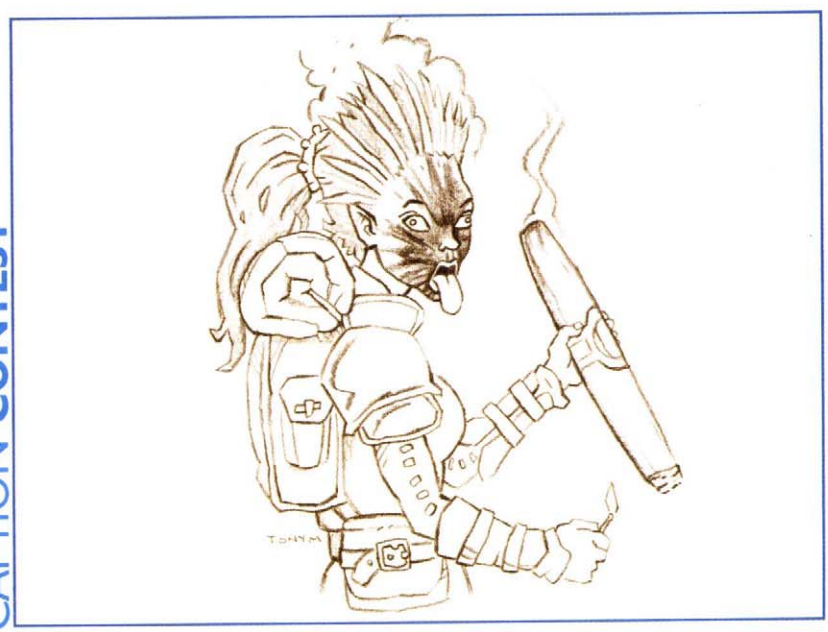

What's so funny? Why, you are! So send your caption for this cartoon to **Caption/DRAGON Magazine, 3245 146th PL SE Suite 110, Bellevue, WA 98007** by March 1st, and be sure to write "issue #303" somewhere on your entry. Your caption will undergo rigorous testing by the editors, and if it passes, it just might be printed in an upcoming issue. There's no need to cut up your magazine. If you want to include the drawing, send in a photocopy.

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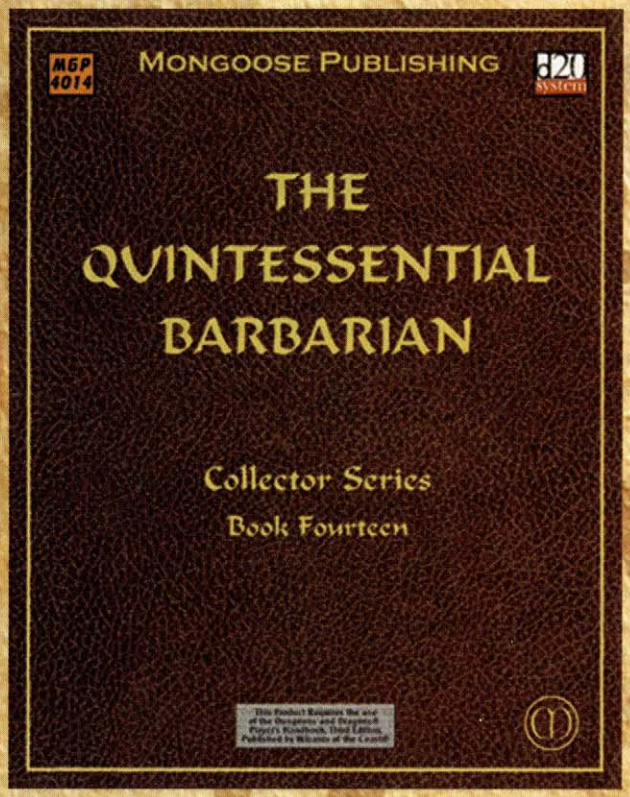

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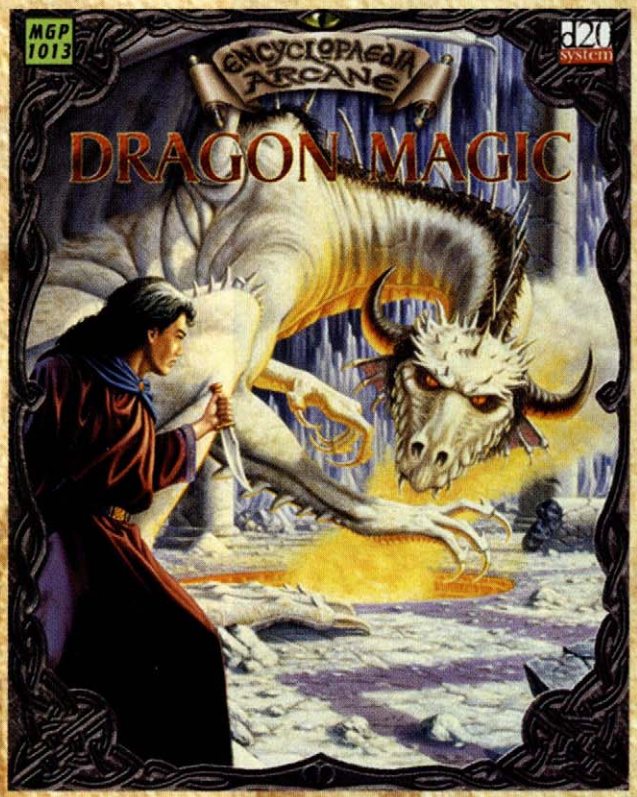

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DUNGEON #97

Life's Bazaar
by Christopher Perkins
The *Dungeon Magazine* Adventure Path begins with this adventure. In the troubled city of Cauldron, children have gone missing from the local orphanage—the latest in a string of strange disappearances. It's up to the characters to brave the dark underside of Cauldron and discover what has happened to the city's missing citizens before more people vanish. A D&D Adventure Path module for four 1st-level PCs.

Heart of the Iron God
by Campbell Pentney
An ancient construct has reappeared, destroying villages and sending people fleeing from their homes in a panic. Now it's heading in the direction of a major port city, and it must be stopped. Troops stream from its feet in battle, and arrows rain from tiny slits in its torso. If the creature is indeed some sort of colossal troop transport, the situation might be even more dire than originally suspected, and only the PCs can infiltrate the device and put a stop to its rampage. A D&D adventure for four 13th-level PCs.

Demonblade
by Hank Woon
A vain and greedy prince is willing to sacrifice his kingdom for the power of the Demonblade. But when he finally gets his hands on the weapon, he discovers too late that the blade is much more than he bargained for. Is the price of a soul a fair trade for immortality if your essence is subsumed by evil? A D&D adventure for four 16th-level PCs.

After this issue *Dungeon/Polyhedron* goes monthly

POLYHEDRON #156

V for Victory
Load up your rifle and enlist for "V for Victory," a stand-alone d20 game of World War II combat. Lead a band of troops up Omaha Beach, storm the streets of Stalingrad, or liberate a Pacific Island from the clutches of the Empire of Japan. V for Victory casts players in the role of infantry, allowing you a ground's eye view of the war that shaped today's world. Designed by Origins Award-winner and Green Ronin publisher Chris Pramas, the game includes more than a dozen new feats, rules to simulate basic training, and a modified combat system with expanded rules on cover and modern weapons.

The issue also includes the final installment of Dennis Detwiller's Godlike comic, a roundup of upcoming d20 products, RPGA news, and more.

and lay on hands 20 times a day . . . as I understand it.

Anyway, tell the good folks at Wizards of the Coast to keep cranking out crap because it makes me appreciate G1, G2, G3, S1, and the other classic products even more.

Don Ross
Address withheld

Have we told you about the upcoming core book revisions?

Jesse Decker

Have it your Way

I am new to D&D, and, well . . . what me and my friends don't like about Dungeons & Dragons is it is way too complicated. There are simply too many rules for us. So we play a shorthand version of D&D. You see, all of my friends play this version of D&D, and since we like D&D so much, we play it short. For example, we just decide things by the dice rolls—we choose what the dice are for and what is best and what is worst. No one gets bored as long as we have a good DM and willing players. Now, don't start thinking I hate your magazine: It rocks. Each day when I get it, I stop everything that will get in my way: homework, mom begging me to do my chores, and my friends annoyingly IMing me. Then I race to my room and read your magazine from cover to cover. I even read the ads and look at the artwork (I love your art). When I'm done, it usually becomes something that sits on the table for morning reading. I have a good dose of *Dragon* for breakfast instead of coffee. I also love the rulebooks. I save my allowance, spend it at my local hobby shop, and become immersed in reading my recently bought book. Overall, keep up the fine work, and please publish things that help new players get started. All of my friends read your magazine, and as I said, it rocks. Thanks to all, and keep the great artwork coming.

Michael Fogleman
Hingham, MA

We're glad you like the magazine, but get your homework done. Yes, you will use what you learn in school later in life. You can probably let the chores slide, but don't tell your mom (or my dad) I said that.

Matthew Sernett

CAPTION CONTEST WINNER

WINNER
"Serves you right for eating caviar."
Congratulations Jonathan Hallliwell!
Houston, TX

RUNNER-UP
"Somebody carved the word 'phonics' on it."
Jason Jackson
Meridian, MS

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- John Nephew, CEO and game designer, Atlas Games
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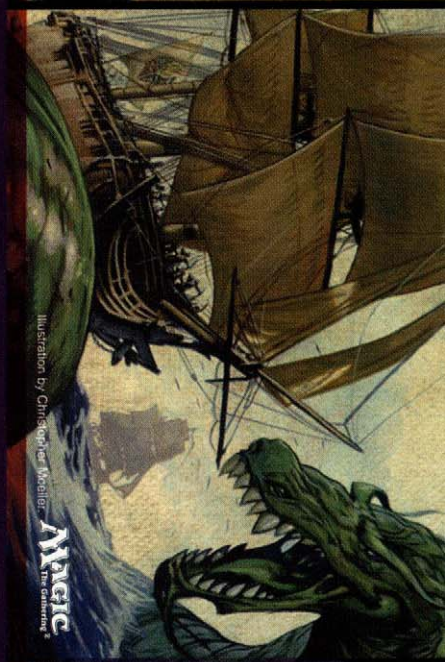

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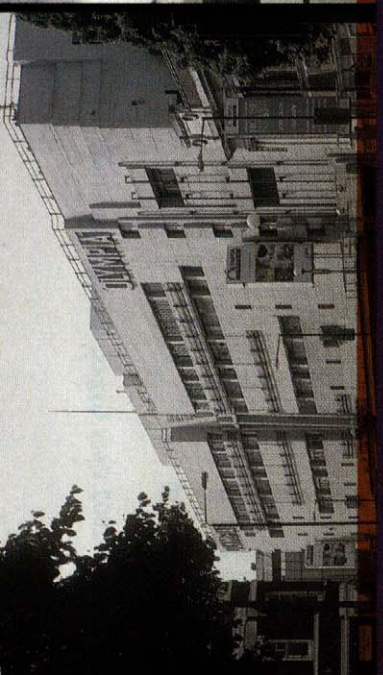

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STAY DOWN, DINDIL. THE LICH PROBABLY THINKS WE ARE GONE. HE IS STILL HOLDING KEV...
I SAY WE RUSH DOWN THERE.
TONYM ©2003
NO. NOT YET...WE DO NOT WANT TO DO ANYTHING THAT MIGHT GET KEV KILLED. WE MUST WAIT UNTIL KEV ESCAPES. THEN...WE...HUH? ;CHOKE<
INCOMING FIREBALL!
CRUD.
KAH FFWOOM!
AAH! MY SLEEVE IS ON FIRE!!

UP ON A SOAPBOX

by Gary Gygax

GETTING EVEN PUTS THE OTHER GUY AHEAD

Of the main stalwarts in my GREYHAWK campaign, Terry Kuntz was right there with the best. Terry was eager and a keen player who alternated between flashes of brilliant play and bouts of bull-headedness that were often much appreciated. The latter were provoked, as it were, by incidental events in play. Terry conceived of the dreaded beholder monster, then really hated to have his character, Terik at the time, confronted by one after I had finished tricking it out for play, but I digress.

When the monk character class was being developed, Terry was immediately taken by the concept. He saw wonderful new vistas opening before him through playing a monk character, so he became the first person to do that. Perhaps it was because at around the same time Ernie was playing a new PC named "Erac's Cousin" or perhaps it was purely the influence of Clint Eastwood's films, but the character was known as "The Monk with No Name." Terry was a devoted participant, playing as often as he could, and it was relatively soon in game terms that The Monk with No Name was a viable character of 4th level, then 5th, and so on. At 8th level, there was much jubilation when experience points built to the number required to become Master of the North Wind. When the trial by combat came, my co-DM, Terry's brother Rob, conducted the action in the contest. The Monk with No Name was bested by the current NPC holder of the 9th level title. Thinking that perhaps the Mage of the Tower in Greyhawk city could lend him some assistance in a re-match, The Monk with No Name paid that worthy a visit.

Here it must be noted that we made certain that any PCs calling upon this potent NPC would not get off lightly. The apprentice of the mage was himself a spellcaster of considerable ability and a practical joker to boot. Whenever anyone knocked on the tower's door, something of prankish sort was the order of the day—slops sent down, a jolt from the door knocker like that of a *shocking grasp* spell, that sort of thing. Thereafter the apprentice would claim his master was too busy to see anyone or couldn't be disturbed so as to elicit some hefty bribe from the caller or callers. After taking the bribe, as often as not he would then inform the visitors to call back tomorrow. In all, both Rob and I roleplayed the fellow as thoroughly annoying and irritating.

So when The Monk with No Name called upon the Mage of the Tower, he got the usual treatment and then some. After suffering outrageous treatment and being told to try again in the morning, the infuriated monk lost track of the reason he had come and decided to make the mage and his apprentice sorry. Revenge would be had, and how sweet it would be. Never again would these uppity spell-mutterers lord it over their supplicants!

It was no problem for the monk to acquire paints and brushes in the city, of course. Clambering up the tall structure, working feverishly in the darkness, the whole of the mage's tower was soon covered in pigments according to plan. When dawn spread over the city, everyone was stunned. The heretofore drab edifice was now bedecked with bold stripes of red and white. The onlookers might have thought of a barber pole when viewing it . . . had there been barbers who dressed wounds on Oerth; however, as there was no analogy, all they could do is admire the colorful décor the tower now sported.

The Mage of the Tower was delighted. As the word spread and people came to look, he spoke to the crowds, taking full credit, and informing the good citizens that from that moment on he was to known as "The Striped Mage of Greyhawk," and so he is to this day.

No official comment has been forthcoming from The Monk with No Name. D

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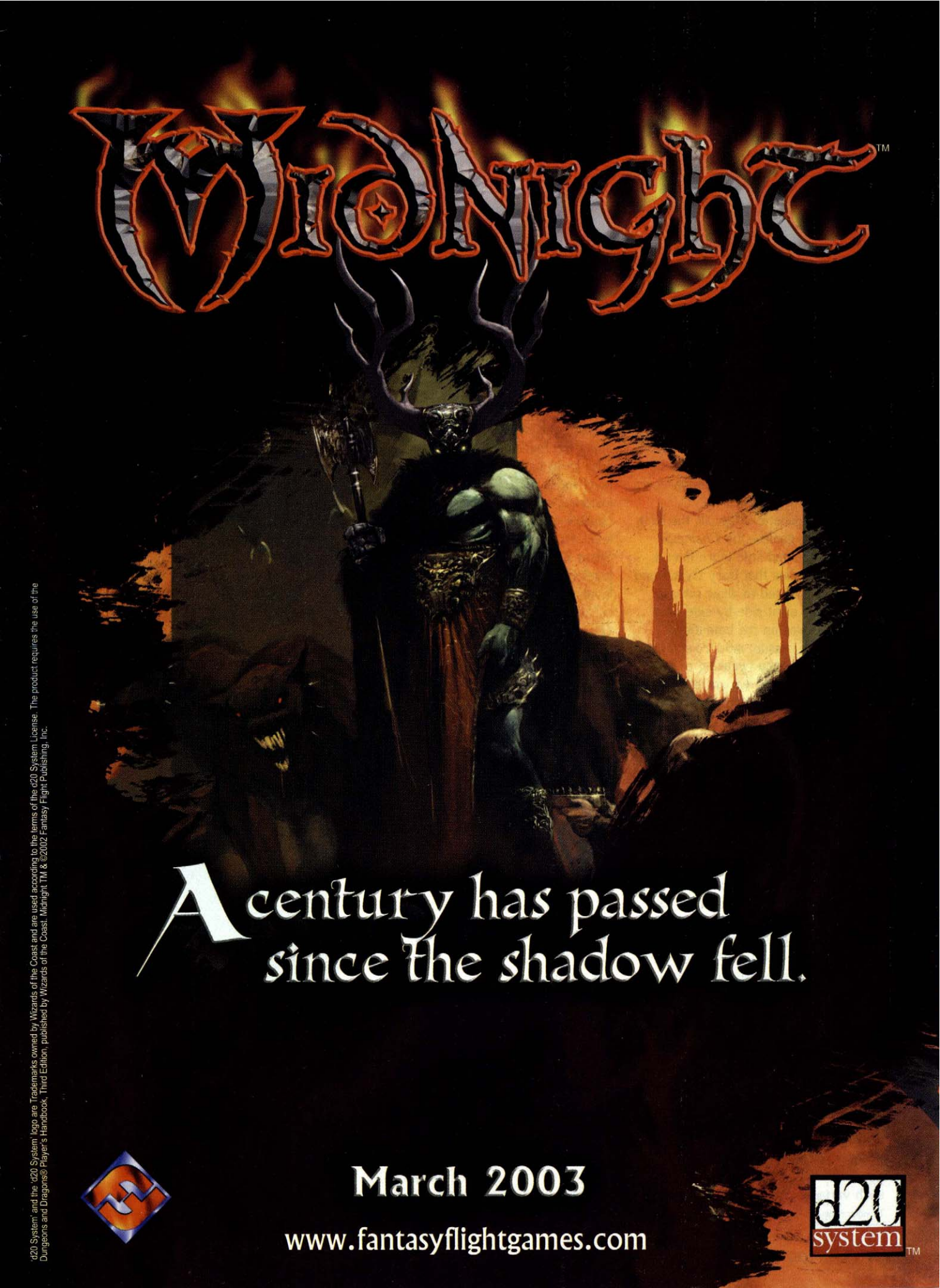

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HOUSE **RULES**:

by Andy collins

METAMAGIC FEATS

One of the things that makes a roleplaying game different from most other games is the proclivity of the players to change the rules as they go along. It's not unique—many Monopoly players use at least one variant rule, and young children often make up rules for their games as they play, but somewhere along the way, most people learn that you're supposed to follow the rules of a game rather than making up your own. By contrast, the average roleplayer either never learns that lesson or simply feels an obligation to ignore it.

Maybe it's genetic. After all, the birth of roleplaying games—the *Chainmail* game—represented little more than a set of house rules that Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren created to allow fantasy characters to exist side-by-side with historical armies on the battlefield. Whatever the reason, most roleplayers see house rules—the tweaking of the game rules to create variant effects—as something between a god-given right and a moral imperative.

Some house rules are appropriate only for your own group. For instance, maybe your group wants druids, not clerics, to be the pre-eminent divine spellcaster, and thus awards druids extra spells at each level, or adds many of the cleric's spells to the druid's list. If that creates the result you want, and the players are happy with it, you shouldn't let anyone tell you that your house rule is "wrong" or "broken." After all, the critics aren't playing in your game; you and your friends are!

In other cases, house rules jump beyond the boundaries of your gaming group. This is particularly common these days, when anyone can set up a website or post to a message board about whatever changes they've made. With such a plethora of options and opinions, it can be hard to find balanced variant rules that can serve as suitable replacements for the parts of the game you'd like to change. This new column is devoted to showing you such variants.

House Rule:
Daily Use Metamagic Feats

The character who selects a metamagic feat gains one daily use of that feat which she can opt to use "on the fly" without previous preparation or extended casting time. The character must decide when casting the spell if she wishes to apply the effect of one of her metamagic feats to the spell.

Using this system, the caster may apply the feat's effect to a maximum spell level, based on the highest spell level she is capable of casting. For instance, a 5th-level wizard is normally capable of casting spells of up to 3rd level. However, she can apply her Silent Spell feat to a maximum of 2nd-level spells, since the maximum spell level affected by Silent Spell is "Highest -1," as shown in the chart below. If she chose to empower a spell, she could apply the Empower Spell feat to any 0 or 1st-level spell, since the maximum affected is "Highest -2." Quicken Spell would be of no use to this wizard until she gains additional levels, since she couldn't even apply it to 0-level spells.

A caster can apply more than one metamagic feat to a spell, or even the same metamagic effect more than once (if allowed by the feat's description). However, to determine the maximum level of spell that can be so affected, add together the values found in Table 1: Variant Metamagic Values. Thus, a 9th-level wizard could enlarge and empower any spell of level 2 or less (-1 plus -2 is -3, and 5th level minus 3 is 2nd level).

Each time you select a metamagic feat, you gain one daily use of that feat. Multiple selections of the same feat are cumulative. For instance, if you select Empower Spell twice, you may use the feat two times rather than one.

In this variant system, the Heighten Spell feat functions slightly differently than other metamagic feats. You may use the Heighten Spell feat to increase a spell's effective level (for purposes of such factors as save DCs and so on) up to the maximum spell level you are capable of casting. For instance, a 3rd-level cleric could heighten a 0 or 1st-level spell to 2nd level, while a 17th-level druid could heighten a 0- through 8th-level spell to 9th level.

ALTERNATE METAMAGIC LIMITS

Metamagic Feat	Maximum Spell Level Affected
Chain Spell*	-3
Cooperative Spell*	-0
Delay Spell*	-3
Empower Spell	-2
Energy Admixture*	-4
Energy Substitution*	-1
Enlarge Spell	-1
Eschew Materials*	-0
Extend Spell	-1
Heighten Spell	special
Insidious Magic**	n/a
Maximize Spell	-3
Persistent Spell*	-4
Quicken Spell	-4
Reach Spell†	-2
Repeat Spell*	-3
Sacred Spell†	-2
Sanctum Spell*	-0
Sculpt Spell*	-1
Silent Spell	-1
Split Ray*	-0
Still Spell	-1
Subdual Substitution*	-0
Tenacious Magic**	n/a
Twin Spell*	-4
Widen Spell*	-3

*From *Tome and Blood*
**From the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*
†From *Defenders of the Faith*

The lead developer for the revised *Player's Handbook*, Andy Collins has also authored or co-authored such projects as the *Epic Level Handbook*, "Spelljammer: Shadow of the Spider Moon," and the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*.

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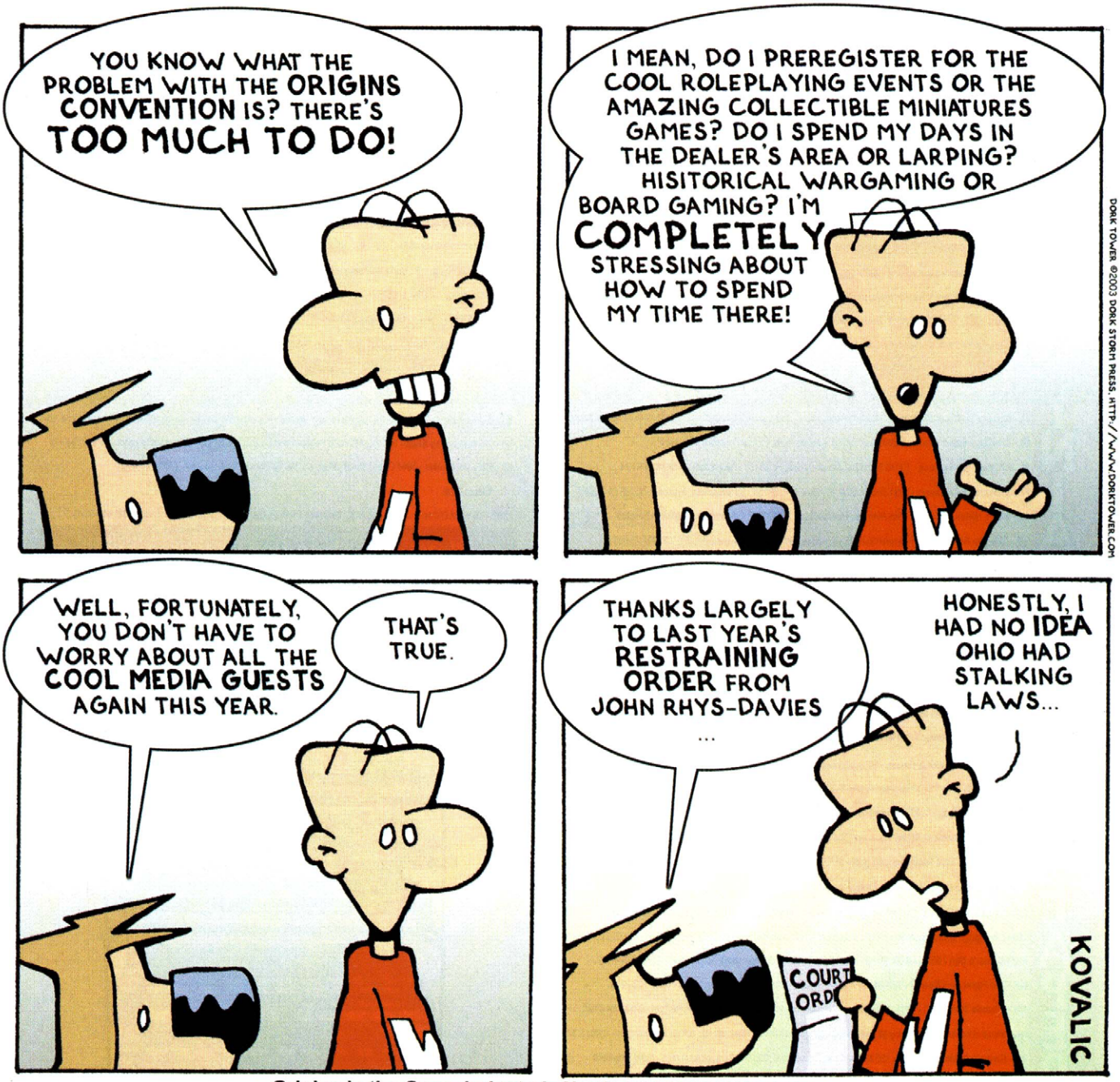
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URBAN HEROES

by Stan! · illustrated by Wayne Reynolds

CHARACTERS READY FOR THE DANGERS OF THE CITY

While much of play centers around adventures through exotic environments far from areas of civilization, cities are the places where such adventures yield dividends of prestige, fame, and social power. From the majesty of Waterdeep, to the towers of Palanthas, or the bustling streets of the City of Greyhawk, few players think of a favored setting without thinking of a city wherein their characters lived and adventured.

The same is probably true of most homebrewed campaigns. Treasure can be found in ruined subterranean chambers, but it is spent in the cities. After the monsters are dispatched and the coins have been divided among the heroes, every adventurer wants to head into town to spend that hard-earned gold.

It's important to remember that things are different in the city—the rules of behavior are not the same. This doesn't mean that an adventurer can't have a good time (or find a good quest) in town. But there are a few things that your characters ought to keep in mind when visiting the more civilized parts of the world.

Cities are complicated places with diverse populations. They are locations where people from all walks of life, all cultures and backgrounds come together and live in relative peace. It is possible that some creatures one might attack on sight in the depths of a dungeon are actually law-abiding, well-thought-of members of the community—particularly in the larger cities.

Some cities are so large that they have entire sections of town filled with monstrous humanoids and other creatures. More than one settlement boasts an Orctown or Illithid Quarter. Adventurers should be certain not to immediately draw weapons when seeing these traditional opponents in a city—that's a good way to get in trouble not just with the monsters in question, but with the rest of the population, too. Any creatures allowed to stay in the community obviously provide some service that benefits the entire city. In fact, they might be the best (or only) source of rare items and materials.

Right, Wrong, and Legal

Life is simple in the dungeon—it is easy to know right from wrong, as well as how to fix any imbalances in that equation when they arise. Things are usually less clear in cities. To live together in harmony, people must come to agreements on what behavior is acceptable, and in the case of kingdoms or other places under the control of a single authority, a decision only has to make sense to one person in order to become the law.

In most instances, laws are pretty much cases of common sense. In almost every community, it's illegal to injure members of the community without good reason. (Note that what a community considers a "good reason" varies so widely from place to place that adventurers are best to just consider this a general ban on unprovoked violence.) However, most cities have their share of eccentric ordinances, so it's a good idea to ask about local laws and customs whenever first arriving in a new town. Most cities do not count ignorance of a regulation as an acceptable excuse for breaking it. And, as any paladin will tell you, the law is the law, and it must be obeyed. Even chaotic or evil communities are likely to have guidelines governing public behavior.

Will Adventure for Food

Of course, anyone desperate for a little bit of adventuring action can always offer his services to the local constable. In many places, the city guard is made up of relatively inexperienced warriors, and they are often willing to provide food and lodging (and sometimes even a modest stipend) for the aid of seasoned

adventuring professionals. The work might not be the most exciting or challenging, but it might at least provide some interesting stories during a visit to town.

If working for the legal authorities is not an adventurer's cup of tea (which would definitely be the case with those who have trouble remembering and sticking to rules and regulations), rich merchants and local nobles often have positions available for bodyguards and personal aides. They usually pay better than the constable, but occasionally they require their employees to perform duties that could cause trouble with the city guard.

If an adventurer is completely unbothered by the possibility of breaking a few laws, local thieves guilds and crime lords often have exciting work that requires experienced hands. Of course, these individuals and organizations are often hard to find. But if one is successful, that usually is proof that she has the temperament and abilities necessary to get the job done.

See Who ELSE Looks Suspicious

As strangers to town, adventurers often feel as though they stick out like sore thumbs. This might be socially uncomfortable, but it allows them to observe how the local populace acts around people they don't know or don't trust. By keeping an eye out for other people the locals treat in a similar manner, adventurers can sniff out the people most likely to cause trouble or disturbances. Sometimes these people are outsiders like the adventurers, but they could also be locals whose profession the other residents don't find palatable. They might be courtesans, thieves, or necromancers, but depending on the city (and the moral and ethical stance of the community) they could just as easily be moneylenders, magistrates, or clerics of a locally unpopular deity.

All Roads Lead to Rome

Cities are generally places that many different sorts of people want to visit—merchants, politicians, pilgrims, spies, and of course, adventurers. It is possible to find entertainment and adventure simply by ignoring the local residents and following the other out-of-towners.

One never knows whom one will meet—nobles traveling in disguise, cursed warriors searching for redemption, or scholars researching an ancient secret. In fact, cities are exactly the place where familiar faces from the past are most likely to reappear from out of the blue. Sometimes these are old allies who might join the adventurers for another quest. At other times they are old foes seeking revenge for a past defeat. But the most likely occurance is that they are simply people the adventurers encountered on their journeys.

Previous acquaintances can greatly help or hinder the adventurers' current situation, and they more than likely give the locals information about the adventurers' past, whether for good or ill. So, if they are people the group aided or supported in the past, the adventurers might find they suddenly have a positive reputation in town. On the other hand, if they are people the group snubbed or treated badly, the adventurers could suddenly find themselves fighting an unearned bad reputation.

Cities are places that people come from all over to visit. Of course, this also means that people leave cities heading off to nearly every imaginable destination. That makes any city a particularly good place to visit if one wants to go anywhere in the world. Even if an adventurer doesn't want to go someplace in particular and just wants to get out of town, a city is a good place to pick up work or rumors of action based elsewhere.

Many adventurers come into the city to buy supplies or resolve a quest and then leave as quickly as they can, but some find that city life suits their tastes. It is entirely possible for a group of adventurers to use a city as a base for their activities—to make lives for themselves as members of a large community and still continue their adventuring careers.

LIFE IS SIMPLE IN THE DUNGEON—IT IS EASY TO KNOW RIGHT FROM WRONG. THINGS ARE USUALLY LESS CLEAR IN THE CITY.

Working for a Living

Living in a city necessitates spending gold on many different things—rent must be paid regularly and on time, food is plentiful but significantly more expensive than foraging in the wild, and most cities have some form of taxation that all citizens must pay. It certainly is possible that the bounty from adventuring will cover all these costs, but if not, the characters must find jobs to cover their expenses.

Even if they have enough gold to cover their needs, adventurers would do well to get a job if they plan to become permanent residents of a city. City folk tend to get suspicious of people who have no job, no visible means of income, and yet occasionally disappear into the wilderness and come back with saddlebags full of riches. Potential jobs for adventurers based on their character classes are discussed in the Entreprenurial Spirit below.

The Joys of Owning A Home

Some adventurers dream of building their own castles and one day retiring as lords or ladies of a manor. If they are successful in that endeavor, a town or city might some day be found on the land surrounding their keeps. Other adventurers have less grand plans, but when they find their place in the world—a city that suits their outlooks to a tee—they might want to consider building or buying a home there.

Some advantages of owning a city residence are obvious. Being a recognized member of the community provides the adventurers with a place to stay when they're between quests or in need of rest and healing, and it also gives them resources in terms of personnel and services they might otherwise have to hunt down. People are often willing to pitch in to help neighbors in ways they'd never do for strangers. The city guard works to protect the home (as well as any valuables stored therein) while the adventurers are away, and the taxes owed for this and other services are a mere fraction of what one would have to pay a trustworthy staff of guards and caretakers.

Another often forgotten benefit of being a home owner in the city is that neighbors, local merchants, and city representatives soon learn what sorts of news, rumors, and situations an adventurer tends to pursue. Then they begin to bring word of interesting opportunities to the person's door, stopping by just to pass along some bit of very useful information.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

Once an adventurer is established in a city, she might want to think about investing in a business or two. This way, even when a quest calls the hero out of town, her presence will still be felt (and reputation will still grow) in town as the business continues to thrive.

The most common business for adventurers to be involved in is running a tavern or inn. It serves a great number of functions the group requires—providing a place to meet prospective clients, someplace to sleep when in town, and food and drink are available any time of the day or night.

If being an innkeeper isn't a character's style, there are also a great many opportunities to open shops whose wares can be supplied by treasure gathered in adventures. A great many of the objects found lying around in dungeons, lairs, and abandoned castles are in high demand among the common residents of a city. And the shop can charge a premium if the merchandise can be reliably linked to a famous (or infamous) incident.

Very few adventurers are so successful during their careers that they have enough gold to last the rest of their lives. The rest must find some job or other means of support to keep themselves in house and home after retiring. Any moderately successful adventurer can scrape together enough gold to open a shop or tavern, but different character classes prepare adventurers for various other city-oriented jobs.

Fighters and Paladins: The most common job for a fighter or paladin to take is a position of leadership in the city guard. Their knowledge of what monsters lurk in the wilds surrounding (or beneath) a city helps prepare the guard to deal with attacks. Of course, each city only needs a handful of watch leaders, so characters might have to take a regular spot on the guard and hope to advance through the ranks. Martial characters also often take jobs as bodyguards for rich residents or as bouncers at local taverns. Of course, noble families who recognize the character's skills might offer a job as the defender of the household or even as the mentor for a young heir. Some are even able to parlay their fame and fortune into schools where they can teach what they have learned to anyone willing to meet their price.

Clerics, Monks, and Druids: The most obvious job for spiritually minded characters is to join the staff of the local house of worship dedicated to their particular deity or belief (or to found one if one is not present in the town). Similarly, they can work at or run orphanages, food banks, or hospices. More ambitious holy people can usually find employment in the court of the local noble or magistrate. In fact, it is not at all uncommon for a pious individual to eventually become magistrate, being a person in whom the masses can place their trust. Should an official position not be available, many successful merchants hire devout adventurers to bless and protect their caravans.

Rogues and Bards: Cities provide rogues with the widest selection of people with whom to interact (be that in a larcenous, coercive, or legitimately professional manner) and bards with the biggest audiences that are always looking for new and interesting tales and songs. Members of both classes can often find professional guilds headquartered in cities—organizations that have the potential to supply lucrative work. If they want to get out of the trade, depending on their particular sets of skills, these adventurers can become valued members of the community as locksmiths, blacksmiths, silversmiths, apothecaries, jewelers, teachers, or any number of other skilled jobs. Both rogues and bards are well suited to positions within a city's government, especially those that call for a delicate touch and a good sense of timing.

Wizards and Sorcerers: The most obvious work for spellcasters is simply to take up residence and let it be generally known that they are skilled in the ways of magic. Without any advertising or even opening a storefront, they will soon find that people from all over the city knock on their doors offering gold in exchange for some specific enchantment, potion, or other magical service. Any spellcasters who can create magic items find their services in even greater demand. And there are always parents who will pay handsomely to have one of their children trained in the mystic arts. Wizards or sorcerers who want to get away from the spellcasting lifestyle still find themselves with many choices. Their years of experience and study make them excellent teachers (provided their temperaments are also right) or advisers to nobles, magistrates, or any local bigwig.

ROGUES ARE WELL SUITED TO POSITIONS WITHIN A CITY'S GOVERNMENT, ESPECIALLY THOSE THAT CALL FOR A DELICATE TOUCH.

Barbarians and Rangers: Many cities feature parks or game reserves that need tending, and these characters are perfectly suited for those jobs. Nobles and particularly wealthy individuals also hire former adventurers to look after their estates. The people in cities generally are too busy with their urban lives to have time for such things as hunting or treating meats, making the need for skilled butchers high. City folk also have a habit of desiring to spend a little bit of time in the wilderness, but rarely have the survival skills to last even a few days. They are usually willing to pay a guide to protect them from their own ignorance, and if they aren't then their families are willing to pay someone to go out into the woods and bring them back safely.

NEW FEATS

Living or spending a great deal of time in a city allows adventurers to cultivate skills and abilities that they would never learn on adventures. They develop relationships with other members of the community and build reputations for reliability and competence that help in ways most never imagined possible. Most of these

feats are effective only in a specified city, but gregarious characters may take these feats multiple times and apply each to a different town in which they are known.

Good Manners

You know how to present yourself in a manner that is considered polite and ingratiating by most city dwellers.

Prerequisites: Wis 12+, Cha 10+.

Benefits: You gain a +2 bonus to Diplomacy, Innuendo, and Sense Motive checks when in any urban environment.

Good Neighbor

You have developed positive relations within your community, and its members are willing to offer you assistance when you need it.

Prerequisites: Cha 12+.

Benefits: When in your chosen city, the initial attitudes of regular members of the community toward you never begin worse than indifferent. You also gain a +4 circumstance bonus to Charisma checks for the purpose of influencing the attitudes of members of the community.

Note: You must specify one city or town in which this feat applies.

Special: You can gain this feat multiple times. Its effects do not stack. Each time you take the feat, it applies to a new city or town.

Hometown Advantage

You know the quickest routes, safest places, and most undetectable hiding spaces within your city.

Benefits: You gain a +3 bonus to Hide checks and to Spot Checks to oppose another's Hide check when on the streets of your chosen city. This effect does not work inside any building unless you have intimate knowledge of its layout (DM's discretion).

Note: You must specify one city or town in which this feat applies.

Special: You can gain this feat multiple times. Its effects do not stack. Each time you take the feat, it applies to a new city or town.

Line of Credit

Your reputation for trustworthiness is such that members of your community are willing to sell you goods and services on credit.

Prerequisites: Cha 12+, Good Neighbor

Benefits: When purchasing an item or service in your chosen city, you can have a line of credit for a number of gold pieces equal to your Charisma score x 100. (This value can not be higher than one-half the town's GP Limit based on Table 4-40: Random Town Generation in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.)

Once you use this ability, you have one month in which to repay the money owed. If you fail to repay the money owed in one month, while within your chosen city you suffer a -5 penalty to all Charisma-based skill checks. This penalty increases by -5 every month (-10 after two months, -15 after three months, and so on).

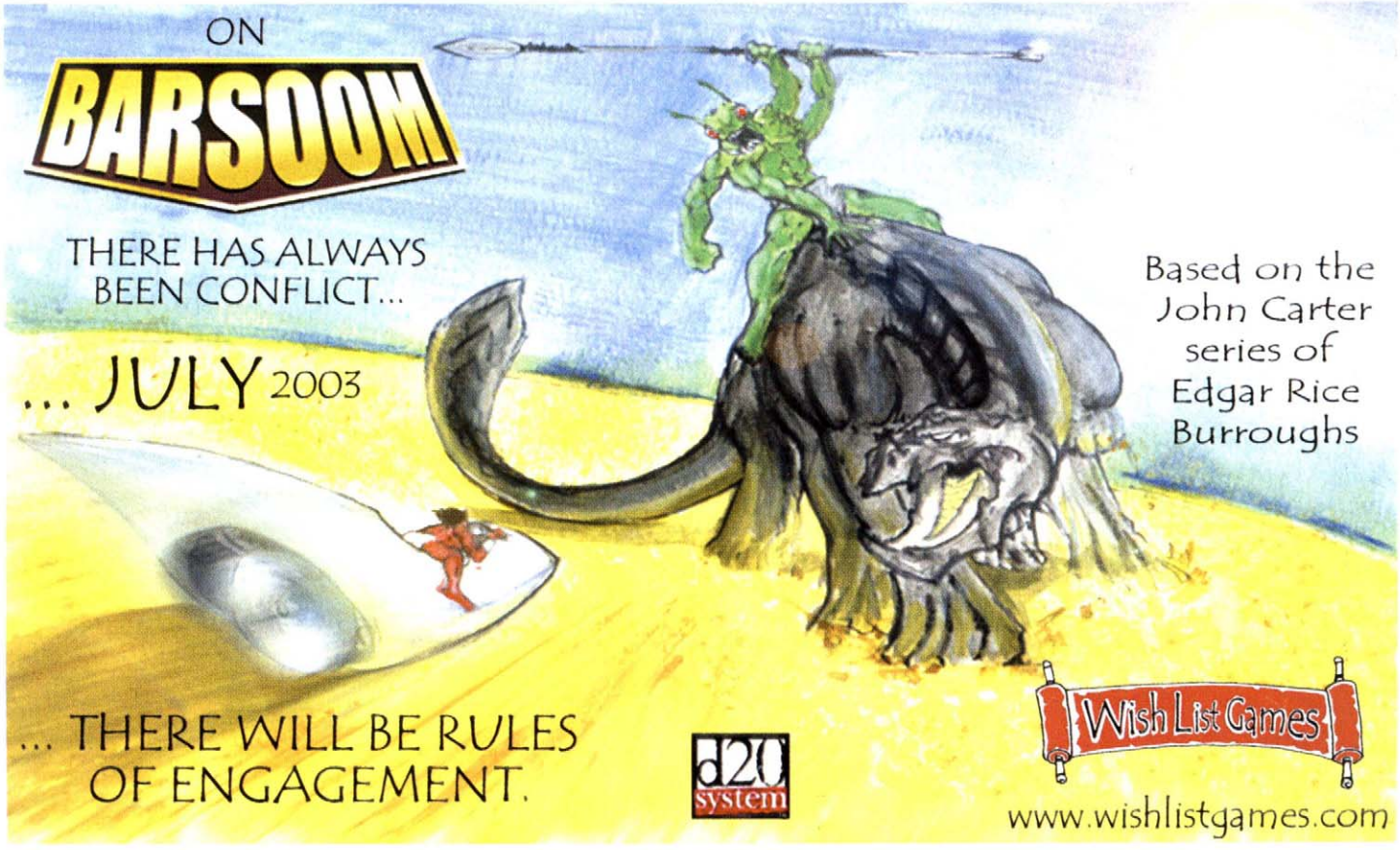
After you use a line of credit for any amount, you may not use it again until you repay the outstanding balance.

Note: This feat only applies within the town or city specified for the Good Neighbor feat used as a prerequisite.

Special: You can gain this feat multiple times. Its effects do not stack. Each time you take the feat, it applies to a new city or town, but you must also have taken the Good Neighbor feat for the appropriate community first.

CLASS COMBOS

The following class combinations illustrate how people who choose to live in cities can still lay valid claim to being adventurers. These characters' skills are sharp enough to adventure in any environment, but they have a particular attachment to urban adventures.



ARISTOCRAT THIEF

The aristocrat thief is a peculiar individual—one who usually has enough money, power, and privilege to live a comfortable life, but who still decides to live a secret life of crime for the sheer excitement of it. By day this character is a well-known member of the community, but by night he is a daring burglar—breaking into impossibly secure buildings and escaping before anyone knows he's been there.

Generally, this character devotes quite a bit of effort to adding style and panache to his criminal activities—leaving a calling card at the scene of each crime or following a theme in his activities (only striking on nights when the moon is full, for example). For the aristocrat thief, a job is not worth doing if people are not going to talk about it for weeks afterward.

Character Choices

The aristocrat thief should have high scores in both Dexterity and Charisma. He starts off as a straight rogue but soon adds in levels of bard (to enhance his public persona and the stylishness of his criminal activities) and fighter (to help him overcome the opposition arrayed against him). It is important to take the Skill Focus (Bluff) feat and to put sufficient ranks into Bluff, Gather Information, Innuendo, and two of the skills listed under special requirements for the spymaster prestige class (see chapter one of *Song and Silence*)—aristocrat thieves usually choose Diplomacy and Disguise.

Because these characters lead double lives, they often spend skill points on ranks of Spot, Listen, Bluff, Diplomacy, and Disguise. They must be sure, however to gain the necessary ranks in Move Silently, Hide, and Perform to qualify for the shadowdancer prestige class (see chapter two of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*). Before becoming shadowdancers at 18th level, they must also have the Dodge, Mobility, and Combat Reflexes feats.

ARISTOCRAT THIEF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

(Compared to the single-classed rogue)

Advantages	Disadvantages
Better saves	Slower sneak attack advancement
Spellcasting	Slower initial base attack progression
Bardic skills	
Better Hit Dice	

ARISTOCRAT THIEF ADVANCEMENT

Level	Class Levels	BAB	Fort/Ref/Will	Abilities Gained
1	Rog1	+0	+0/+2/+0	Sneak attack +1d6
2	Rog2	+1	+0/+3/+0	Evasion
3	Rog2/Brd1	+1	+0/+5/+2	Bardic music, bardic knowledge, 0-level bard spells
4	Rog2/Brd1/Ftr1	+2	+2/+5/+2	Bonus feat
5	Rog2/Brd2/Ftr1	+3	+2/+6/+3	1st-level bard spells
6	Rog2/Brd2/Ftr2	+4	+3/+6/+3	Bonus feat
7	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2	+5	+4/+6/+4	Uncanny dodge (Dex bonus to AC), sneak attack +2d6
8	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM1	+5	+4/+8/+6	Cover identity, required ranks, sneak attack +3d6
9	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM2	+6/+1	+4/+9/+7	Required ranks, undetectable alignment
10	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM3	+7/+2	+5/+9/+7	Quick change, required ranks, uncanny dodge (can't be flanked)
11	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM4	+8/+3	+5/+10/+8	Cover identity, required ranks, sneak attack +4d6
12	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM5	+8/+3	+5/+10/+8	Required ranks, slippery mind, spot scrying
13	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM6	+9/+4	+6/+11/+9	Required ranks, uncanny dodge (+1 against traps)
14	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM7	+10/+5	+6/+11/+9	Cover identity, required ranks, sneak attack +5d6
15	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM8	+11/+6/+1	+6/+12/+10	Deep cover, hear subharmonics, required ranks
16	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM9	+11/+6/+1	+7/+12/+10	Detection damper, reactive body language, required ranks
17	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM10	+12/+7/+2	+7/+13/+11	Mind blank, required ranks
18	Rog3/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM10/ShD1	+12/+7/+2	+7/+15/+11	Hide in plain sight
19	Rog4/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM10/ShD1	+13/+8/+3	+7/+16/+11	
20	Rog5/Brd2/Ftr2/SpM10/ShD1	+13/+8/+3	+8/+16/+12	Sneak attack +6d6

LOCAL HERO

Local heroes are individuals who protect a neighborhood or quarter of the city from the depredations of hooligans or organized crime. Alternatively, sometimes these individuals fight for the people against a greedy or despotic ruler or government.

These are often reclusive people who begin their careers simply by saving a neighbor from being robbed or beaten. Eschewing attention, they are generally surprised when people start talking about their activities, creating legends that comfort those in need. It is when they realize how much good they can do, both physically and spiritually, that they truly embrace the role. As their legends grow, local heroes begin to embrace their fame and become more overt protectors and leaders of their people.

Character Choices

The local hero must have an alignment of either lawful good or lawful neutral in order to qualify for all the required classes and prestige classes. It is her belief in the law (at least in the intrinsic law of humanity) and righteousness that separates her from thugs and common criminals.

Because the monk has a limited number of skill points per level, she might have to devote all of them to Gather Information, Intimidate, Search, and Sense Motive in order to qualify for the vigilante prestige class at 6th level (see chapter one of *Song and Silence*). To this end, she must also devote one feat slot to Alertness.

If there are skill points remaining, local heroes often spend them on ranks of Hide, Listen, Knowledge (local), Move Silently, or Spot. Feats favored by these characters include Expertise, Improved Disarm, Improved Initiative, Improved Trip, Weapon Finesse, and Weapon Focus.

LOCAL HERO STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

(Compared to the single-classed monk)

Advantages	Disadvantages
Spellcasting	No high-level monk special abilities
Vigilante special abilities	Unarmed damage remains 1d8
Healing abilities	

LOCAL HERO ADVANCEMENT

Level	Class Levels	BAB	Fort/Ref/Will	Abilities Gained
1	Mnk1	+0	+2/+2/+2	Unarmed strike, stunning attack, evasion
2	Mnk2	+1	+3/+3/+3	Deflect Arrows feat
3	Mnk3	+2	+3/+3/+3	Still mind
4	Mnk4	+3	+4/+4/+4	Slow fall (20 ft.)
5	Mnk4/Ftr1	+4	+4/+6/+4	Bonus feat
6	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig1	+4	+4/+8/+6	Detect evil, 1st-level vigilante spells
7	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig2	+5	+4/+9/+7	Search for clues, streetwise +2
8	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig3	+6/+1	+5/+9/+7	Incredible luck 1/day, 2nd-level vigilante spells
9	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig4	+7/+2	+5/+10/+8	Streetwise +4, Shadow
10	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig5	+7/+2	+5/+10/+8	Punish the guilty 1/day, 3rd-level vigilante spells
11	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig6	+8/+3	+6/+10/+8	Streetwise +6
12	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig7	+9/+4	+6/+10/+8	Incredible luck 2/day, punish the guilty 2/day, 4th-level vigilante spells
13	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig8	+10/+5	+6/+11/+9	Streetwise +8
14	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig9	+10/+5	+7/+11/+9	Slippery mind
15	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig10	+11/+6/+1	+7/+12/+10	Punish the guilty 3/day
16	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig10/Pal1	+12/+7/+2	+9/+12/+10	Divine grace, lay on hands, divine health
17	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig10/Pal2	+13/+8/+3	+10/+12/+10	Aura of courage, smite evil
18	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig10/Pal3	+14/+9/+4	+10/+13/+11	Remove disease, turn undead
19	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig10/Pal4	+15/+10/+5	+11/+13/+11	
20	Mnk4/Ftr1/Vig10/Pal5	+16/+11/+6/+1	+11/+13/+11	Special mount

NATURALIST

The naturalist is a character who is at home in both the courts of kings and the depths of the wilderness. He is someone who has taken the time to learn the ways of animals and nature, but does not necessarily place them above the needs of civilization.

Naturalists spend a great deal of time traveling the world, documenting the secrets of exotic animals and natural medicine, then they come back to the cities to publish their discoveries. In order to find backers to fund their expeditions, they become quite gifted storytellers, and they find themselves invited to all the most exclusive parties and gatherings. Sometimes, though, naturalists find themselves ostracized by other outdoors folks, who resent their sharing the secrets of the land with city folk whom they feel have no respect for the natural world.

Character Choices

Because rangers and bards both gain a base 4 skill points per level, a naturalist might have to spend most of them on required skills for the king of the wild prestige class (see chapter five of *Masters of the Wild*). To that end, the character must also take the Endurance feat (as a ranger he gets the required Track feat for free). The naturalist must also decide early on what terrain he will specialize in (although that will depend greatly on the location of his city) so that he can choose the correct prerequisite skill.

After qualifying for the king of the wild, the naturalist must spend skill points on Decipher Script, Intuit Direction, and Profession (Cartographer)—plus fill an available feat slot with Alertness—so that he can qualify for the royal explorer prestige class when the time is right (see chapter one of *Song and Silence*). The other prerequisite (reporting on an exploration) should easily be filled through proper roleplaying if the DM knows your goal in advance.

NATURALIST STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

(Compared to the single-classed ranger)

Advantages	Disadvantages
Bardic spellcasting	No ranger spells
Bardic skills	Lower base attack
Higher saves	
More special abilities	

NATURALIST ADVANCEMENT

Level	Class Levels	BAB	Fort/Ref/Will	Abilities Gained
1	Rgr1	+1	+2/+0/+0	Track, 1st favored enemy
2	Rgr1/Brd1	+1	+2/+2/+2	Bardic music, bardic knowledge, 0-level bard spells
3	Rgr1/Brd2	+2	+2/+3/+3	1st-level bard spells
4	Rgr2/Brd2	+3	+3/+3/+3	
5	Rgr2/Brd3	+4	+4/+3/+3	
6	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW1	+5	+6/+3/+5	Terrain skill bonuses
7	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW2	+6/+1	+7/+3/+6	Endure elements 5, terrain movement
8	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW3	+7/+2	+7/+4/+6	Attack native creatures +1, terrain camouflage
9	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW4	+8/+3	+8/+4/+7	Bonus feat
10	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW5	+9/+4	+8/+4/+7	Attack native creatures +2, endure elements 10
11	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW6	+10/+5	+9/+5/+8	Detect animals or plants
12	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW7	+11/+6/+1	+9/+5/+8	Adaptation, attack native creatures +3
13	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW8	+12/+7/+2	+10/+5/+9	Bonus feat, endure elements 15
14	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW9	+13/+8/+3	+10/+6/+9	Attack native creatures +4
15	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW10	+14/+9/+4	+11/+6/+10	Endure elements 20, freedom of movement
16	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW10/RylExp1	+14/+9/+4	+13/+8/+10	Bonus language, explore lore
17	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW10/RylExp2	+15/+10/+5	+14/+9/+10	Explore check (Diplomacy)
18	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW10/RylExp3	+16/+11/+6/+1	+14/+9/+11	Bonus language, brave
19	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW10/RylExp4	+17/+12/+7/+2	+15/+10/+11	Explore check (Sense Motive)
20	Rgr2/Brd3/KQW10/RylExp5	+17/+12/+7/+2	+15/+10/+11	Bonus language, Search bonus

THE ASTRAL

Cities of the Planes

N'GATI FORTRESS

by James Jacobs · illustrated by Rob Alexander

The fortress city of N'gati floats through the infinite void of the Astral Plane, alone but not lonely. A wonder to behold, the place is a haven and gateway for adventurers, explorers, and scholars from all corners of reality. N'gati is a shelter in a hostile realm, a place beyond the restraints of society and time itself, where spellcasters can retreat to conduct their research. Adventurers of all sorts use the fortress as a place to recover from battles or to catalog the results of their explorations. In addition, the city's collection of portals makes it a waystation that planar travelers can use for exploring the endless reaches of the multiverse.

N'gati's limited surface area has restricted its growth, and for the past few centuries its population has remained stagnant by choice. The majority of its inhabitants are retired adventurers, often hand-selected by the rulers of the city for strengths and skills that can benefit the city as a whole. As a result, N'gati has become unusually powerful, and its citizens are higher in level than those of any other city of similar size.

Despite the power of its citizens, however, the city of N'gati is not an idyllic place of safety. It was founded upon the long-forgotten carcass of a terrible unknown construct from a bygone age—a construct whose very existence was inimical to mortal life. And this construct is not *quite* dead.

THE HISTORY OF N'GATI

The construct upon which the city was founded was discovered hundreds of years ago by a powerful wizard named Yanirin Zoth. Like many of his peers, Zoth had difficulty accepting the fact that as a mortal creature, he couldn't possibly live long enough to absorb all the knowledge he felt he deserved to learn. Early experiments into the magical restoration or preservation of youth proved to be uniformly dangerous and unpredictable, and the concept of embracing undeath to meet his needs nauseated him. In his travels, he eventually discovered the Astral Plane, and its timelessness appeared to be the answer he sought.

At first, Zoth merely traveled to the Astral Plane with his books and spent countless hours reading and studying them. Unfortunately, the astral "void" was far from empty, and Zoth's studies were constantly interrupted by wandering pests, sudden psychic storms, githyanki raiding parties, and once even an astral dreadnought. In most of these encounters, Zoth was forced to flee, abandoning books and notes that represented hours, days, or weeks of work. He soon realized that if he wanted privacy, he would need a stable place to study—a sort of astral fortress where he could read and even perform magical experiments in peace.

In his previous astral travels, Zoth had come upon numerous githyanki cities and fortresses built upon masses of elemental earth or even the calcified

ASTRAL FORTRESS

An *astral fortress* is a 6-inch-diameter replica of N'gati made from a dull metal. Its primary purpose is to provide physical transport to the city of N'gati from elsewhere in the multiverse. Twice a day as a standard action, anyone who holds an *astral fortress* can use a *plane shift* effect. Activating the device from outside N'gati transports the user to the Grand Conduit Chamber in the Conduit Council Palace (see below). Activating the *astral fortress* while in N'gati instead transports the user to the precise location from which he or she last used an *astral fortress* (even if it was not the same one) to enter N'gati. A user who did not employ an *astral fortress* to get into N'gati is instead transported to the Grand Conduit Chamber. Transporting to or from N'gati with an *astral fortress* is always precise; the item negates the normal chance for imprecise travel associated with the *plane shift* spell.

The device also has a secondary purpose: Its incredibly detailed surface can serve as a map of the city. By manipulating the *astral fortress* for 1 round, a user within N'gati can determine his or her exact location, as well as the shortest route to another known location within the city. As a result, the owner of an *astral fortress* can never become lost in N'gati. This ability can be used as often as desired.

Caster Level: 13th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *find the path*, *plane shift*, must be created in N'gati; **Market Price:** 177,200 gp; **Weight:** 5 lb.

bodies of dead gods. Such an object would make an excellent foundation upon which to build a fortress, but unfortunately, he had not yet encountered one that was vacant. Githyanki settlers and astral predators had already claimed all the drifting hulks he had seen, and neither sort of inhabitant seemed willing to share. So for many years, Zoth searched the far reaches of the plane for some unclaimed territory.

A Perfect Site

Finally, Zoth found a ruined hulk of massive proportions. Through extensive research, he learned that this strange carcass was the remains of an ancient construct, referred to as the N'gati in some of his ancient texts, and created eons ago by a wholly inhuman race bent on colonizing the Astral Plane.

There was nothing even remotely human about the N'gati—indeed, its structure was primordial and even a bit disturbing to anyone accustomed to the anthropomorphic frame. The construct's body was roughly spherical, about 1,000 feet in diameter. The majority of its surface was covered by a thick mass of petrified tendrils. Around the sphere's equator, a ring of larger coiled tendrils—often more than 100 feet in length—radiated outward in a tangled mass. At one of the body's "poles," a single twisted arm curved out to a distance of about 400 feet, where it ended in a large array of frozen eyes and toothless maws. A similar structure had obviously once existed at the other pole as well, but it had evidently been broken off near its base long ago, leaving only a fused mass of rubble and scree.

The N'gati somewhat unsettled Zoth at first, but he soon grew accustomed to its alien form. The fact that the ruined construct's body generated its own gravity was a godsend to Zoth, since he no longer had to worry about his wizardly tomes spiraling unnoticed into the void after an accidental bump. Over the next several years, Zoth used his magic and resources to build a palace atop the ruins of the broken polar arm. Thereafter, he spent many years sequestered away in its quiet halls with his books. After nearly a decade of study, Zoth realized that there was something missing from his refuge—company.

A City Is Born

The wizard's need for companionship gave rise to perhaps his most ambitious idea yet. He envisioned the N'gati's entire surface covered with buildings and towers, and populated by scholars from across the planes. In such a city, anyone who sought seclusion tempered with the company of like-minded geniuses could find a home. So Zoth created the first *astral fortresses*—tiny metal replicas of the N'gati's body that could magically transport their owners directly to the real construct on the Astral Plane. He sent out two dozen of these items to fellow scholars and wizards he had met and befriended in his travels, and in no time at all, N'gati had twenty-four new inhabitants.

Each of these wizards built a mansion, tower, study, or laboratory on the surface of the sphere. Many also brought friends and family to live with them. Zoth himself fell in love with one of these wizards, a talented human evoker named Irial Kealnikar, and married her.

As his love for his new wife grew, Zoth became less and less interested in his studies, and eventually he returned to the Material Plane with her so that they could raise a family. But tragedy struck; Irial died giving birth to their second son. Distraught at the loss of his wife, Zoth was even more devastated when he tried to have her resurrected and discovered that her spirit mysteriously refused to return. In his grief, Zoth left his two sons, Larantis and Sorel, in the care of a local temple and returned to his astral palace.

But another shock awaited Zoth at the fortress. In his absence, the scant handful of dwellings on the construct's body had blossomed into a full-fledged city, which the inhabitants had christened N'gati. Much to Zoth's dismay, the population of N'gati now included not just the quiet scholars who had been living there at the time of his departure, but all manner of riffraff from the Material Plane as well. While he was away, his one-time allies had reverse-engineered the construction of his *astral fortresses* and created thousands of the devices, which they subsequently offered for sale to anyone who could afford their prices. As a result, rich nobles and adventurers had flooded into N'gati, building their own homes, shops, and towers into the increasingly crowded cityscape. A few of these newcomers had even begun to hollow out the equatorial tentacles of the body and dig down into the stony flesh to create subterranean mansions and laboratories.

Zoth was incensed. His vision of a quiet retreat where wizards could go to study had vanished. In its place was a crowded, noisy mass of spoiled nobles seeking cheap immortality and churlish, often destructive adventurers who wanted to use the city as a base of operations. To accommodate the latter, several conjurers and transmuters had

formed a society called the Conduit Council, whose members were hard at work building a network of planar gateways into the surviving polar arm. Zoth raged from estate to estate, seeking allies who would help him rebuild the city according to his original vision. Alas, he discovered that his one-time friends were more interested in making a profit than in reclaiming the city as a wizards' retreat. They informed Zoth in no uncertain terms that they planned to continue building *astral fortresses* and inviting more and more wealthy tenants to join their city.

The Stirring

Then disaster struck in the form of an incident that became known as the Stirring. Unbeknownst to everyone (including Zoth himself), the supposedly dead construct was alive after all. The growth of buildings on its skin had gone largely unnoticed, but when surface space grew scarce and new arrivals began to carve underground homes into its very flesh, the sleeping construct reacted. Tremors briefly plagued the city, then huge chasms opened in the surface, unleashing a seething horde of shapeless horrors, christened n'gatispawn, that immediately began to lay waste to the city and its populace.

The resulting battle was furious and terrible, and none were more stalwart in defense of the city than Zoth himself. The n'gatispawn were eventually driven back into the depths, but only at a great cost in lives and resources. Zoth himself vanished sometime during the battle, and his body was never recovered.

N'gatispawn

Large Aberration
Hit Dice: 12d8+36 (90 hp)
Initiative: +3
Speed: 20 ft., fly 160 ft. (perfect, on Astral Plane only)
AC: 8 (-1 size, -1 Dex), touch 8, flat-footed 8
Attacks: 4 spikes +13 melee
Damage: Spike 1d10+5 plus burrowing
Face/Reach: 5 ft. by 5 ft./10 ft.
Special Attacks: Burrowing spikes, maddening gaze
Special Qualities: Amorphous form, blindsight 60 ft., DR 5/—, immunities (acid, cold, sonic); fire resistance 20, scent, SR 26, tremorsense
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +3, Will +11
Abilities: Str 21, Dex 8, Con 17, Int 16, Wis 13, Cha 10
Skills: Hide +10, Listen +15, Move Silently +12, Spot +15
Feats: Alertness, Improved Critical (spike), Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Power Attack

Climate/Terrain: N'gati
Organization: Solitary, pair, or swarm (3-20)
Challenge Rating: 12
Treasure: None
Alignment: Chaotic neutral

TREMORS BRIEFLY PLAGUED THE CITY, THEN HUGE CHASMS OPENED IN THE SURFACE, UNLEASHING A SEETHING HORDE OF SHAPELESS HORRORS.

Advancement: 13-24 HD (Large), 25-36 HD (Huge)

The n'gatispawn are nightmarish creatures somehow generated by the N'gati, an ancient slumbering construct adrift in the Astral Plane. Although they seem to possess intelligence, they exhibit little desire to do anything other than protect their home and cleanse it of infestations.

A n'gatispawn stands about 12 feet tall and resembles an inverted cone balanced on its point. From this point extends a mass of long, thin, grasping feelers that allow the creature to grope its way along solid surfaces. The skin of a n'gatispawn seethes with oil and mucus, and its "head" consists of a deep hollow filled with supernatural darkness and rimmed with a fringe of strange sensory organs. The n'gatispawn's form is malleable, and it can compress its shape to flow through a space as small as 1 inch by 1 inch. As a native astral creature, it has no need to eat, drink, or sleep.

N'gatispawn have never been encountered anywhere except on the N'gati itself. Indeed, they are bound to it in some mysterious way and cannot survive more than a day of physical separation from it. Sages speculate that the n'gatispawn are all that remains of a slave race once bred to keep the construct clean and in good repair. This theory is true as far as it goes, but the n'gatispawn actually do more than protect the N'gati from physical harm. Their secondary function is to harvest thoughts from other living creatures and transmit them to the dormant construct in the form of dreams. Whether such dreams are meant to educate, entertain, or feed the N'gati is unknown even to the n'gatispawn.

The n'gatispawn are inscrutable. They can understand any spoken language, although they do not speak themselves.

Combat

A n'gatispawn attacks by releasing a storm of long, thin spikes from the dark hollow that serves as its head. The creature is straightforward in its tactics, focusing all its attacks on a single target until it implants at least one spike. It never retreats from battle, yet it does not fight stupidly. Groups of these creatures often orchestrate their attacks with shocking intelligence—flanking opponents, focusing on enemies that can harm them, and pursuing foes through complicated mazes and defenses.

Burrowing Spikes (Ex): Any corporeal creature hit by the n'gatispawn's spike attack must attempt a Reflex saving throw (DC 19). Success indicates that the spike deals the indicated damage, then retracts back into the n'gatispawn's body. Failure indicates that the spike breaks off and becomes flexible, coiling and slithering like a snake as it burrows into the victim's body. The broken spike flenses away skin and punctures internal organs as it progresses, dealing 1 point of Constitution damage per round of burrowing. During this time, the victim can take only 1 partial action per round. This Constitution damage is cumulative for multiple spikes; that is, a creature with four spikes in its body takes 4 points of Constitution damage per round. However, additional spikes do not further reduce the victim's allowed actions.

A burrowing spike can be stopped by cutting it out of the victim's body

with a slashing weapon. Doing so requires a full-round action and a successful Heal check (DC 15), and the attempt deals 1d6 points of damage to the victim, regardless of success. A successful Heal check (DC 20) or the application of a *cure* spell or some other healing effect (*heal, healing circle,* or the like) stops all spikes in a creature's body from burrowing and turns them to fluid, which quickly drains away. If not stopped by either of these methods, the spikes continue to burrow until the victim dies. A creature that dies while a spike is burrowing into its body is transformed into a new n'gatispawn in 24 hours.

Maddening Gaze (Su): The inky depths of a n'gatispawn's interior seem like a limitless void. The thoughts of any creature viewing this void become mired in its infinity and are transmitted to the N'gati itself in the form of dreams.

Anyone within 30 feet of a n'gatispawn who meets its gaze must succeed at a Will saving throw (DC 16) or suffer 1d4 points of Intelligence drain. The n'gatispawn heals 5 points of damage whenever it drains Intelligence.

Amorphous Form (Ex): A n'gatispawn is immune to paralysis, stunning, and polymorphing. It is not subject to critical hits, sneak attacks, or flanking.

Blindsight (Ex): A n'gatispawn is blind, but blindsight allows it to maneuver and fight as well as a sighted creature. Through this ability, it can discern objects and creatures within 60 feet. The n'gatispawn usually does not need to make Spot or Listen checks to notice creatures within range of its blindsight.

Scent (Ex): A n'gatispawn can detect approaching enemies, sniff out hidden foes, and track by sense of smell.

Tremorsense (Ex): A n'gatispawn can automatically sense the location of anything within 60 feet that is in contact with the ground.

A New City Plan

In the wake of the Stirring, the attitude of N'gati's populace shifted dramatically. The citizens had witnessed Zoth's heroic actions to save the city, and they quickly realized that he had always had the settlement's best interests at heart. They further realized that he had been right to try to keep the city small, though possibly for the wrong reasons. Clearly, it was their own zeal for expansion that had riled up the n'gatispawn. The city's inhabitants now understood that their settlement had grown up on the skin of a creature that still slept, and that the Stirring had been, in effect, a warning against awakening it.

The citizens didn't want to give up their homes and the advantages of the timeless environs, so they agreed to curb their efforts at expansion and allow their city's growth to stagnate. And why not? They had no need to eat, drink, or sleep on the Astral Plane, so there was no need to follow the typical urban growth model. Once this decision was made, all construction of *astral fortresses* immediately ceased, and many of those that already existed were destroyed.

The residents unanimously approved the Conduit Council as the administrative body for the city, and to its members fell the responsibility of protecting the citizenry from Stirrings by preventing further expansion. The Council decreed that the taverns, inns, and laboratories of N'gati would remain available to all citizens, as well as to visitors who found their way to the city by any means. By charging fees for the use of these resources, the citizens could maintain sufficient cashflow to finance their often hedonistic lifestyles and their personal magical experiments. But since the Stirring, visitors can stay only a limited time, and new citizenships are granted only when existing citizens die, are banished, or decide to leave for good—all extremely rare occurrences.

GETTING TO N'GATI

The fortress city of N'gati is difficult (if not impossible) to reach by conventional astral travel because it has no fixed location. Sometimes the city drifts on the currents of the psychic wind, sometimes it remains motionless, and occasionally it travels in seemingly random directions. The Conduit Council has determined that the construct's wanderings are somehow controlled by subtle, noncatastrophic Stirrings deep within its core. However, despite the funding and time that is constantly devoted to this research, the Council has determined neither what causes these micro-Stirrings, nor what purpose the random movements they generate might have.

Magical travel to N'gati (by *teleport,* for example) is much more efficient than astral projection. However, the devices known as *astral fortresses* continue to provide the most effective method of reaching the city. Although they are much less common than they were during the heyday of N'gati's growth, more than two hundred *astral fortresses* remain unaccounted for today. Many of them are doubtless gathering dust on collectors' shelves or in monsters' lairs, but every once in a while, an industrious individual finds one and manages to figure out how to use it.

N'GATI TODAY

Most visitors find N'gati a strange, somewhat disturbing place. The construct upon which the city is built generates its own gravity, so it functions almost like a miniature planet—"down" always points toward the creature's core. Although this gravity makes normal overland travel feasible, N'gati's citizens prefer to use thought to move about—a fact that makes it easy to tell the visitors from the locals. Since the typical visitor reaches N'gati through the use of an *astral fortress,* astrally projected individuals are exceedingly rare. Those who use astral projection are always visitors, never citizens.

The city itself looks quite strange, and new visitors usually experience a powerful sensation of vertigo for days after arriving. The "sky" above is in fact the glowing gray radiance of the Astral Plane, occasionally peppered with colorful portals or roiling, tubelike conduits. The city's skyline only enhances the sense of vertigo and disorientation. The horizon is startling and obvious, almost as if the buildings and their denizens were impossibly tall features on a planet.

Important Organizations of N'gati

Many citizens of N'gati are noteworthy in some way, since most are high-level adventurers. The three groups that are most likely to interact with visitors, however, are the Conduit Council (particularly its leaders), the Amber Watchers, and the Awakeners.

Conduit Council Leaders

N'gati is ruled by the three high-level arcane spellcasters who head the Conduit Council. Currently, this "inner circle" consists of Therill Zoth (son of Sorel Zoth), Kalathni Svinn, a gnome sorcerer, and Yamnu Kaskulak, a bariaur ranger/wizard. Although this oligarchy makes all its decisions democratically, Therill Zoth is the spokesman for the group and functions as its leader.

The Amber Watchers

The Conduit Council is in turn served by the Amber Watchers, a group of highly trained fighter/rogues who wear distinctive magic amber armor. The organization functions as a police force, patrolling the streets and buildings, protecting the citizens, preventing trouble from visitors, and ferreting out Awakeners (see below). Its members also receive special training in how to fight n'gatispawn should there ever be another Stirring. Although serious about their jobs, the Amber Watchers aren't unfriendly, and they usually treat visitors as well as citizens with respect.

The organization maintains its membership at exactly three hundred fifty, recruiting members only when needed. Its headquarters resides in the lower chambers of the Conduit Council Palace, secrued by guards and traps.

Average Amber Watcher: Male or female human Ftr 5/Rog 4; CR 9; Medium-size humanoid; HD 5d10+10 plus 4d6+8; hp 59; Init +5; Spd 30 ft.; AC 18, touch 11, flat-footed 18; Atk +12/+7 melee (1d10+5 plus 1d6 electricity/19-20, *+1 shock bastard sword*), or +10/+5 ranged (1d8/x3, masterwork longbow); SA sneak attack +2d6; SQ evasion, traps, uncanny dodge (Dex bonus to AC); AL LN; SV Fort +7, Ref +8, Will +6; Str 15, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 11.

Skills and Feats: Craft (weaponsmithing) +10, Diplomacy +7, Forgery +12, Intimidate +7, Listen +9, Sense Motive +13, Spot +9, Use Rope +8; Exotic Weapon Proficiency (bastard sword), Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Skill Focus (Forgery), Skill Focus (Sense Motive), Weapon Focus (bastard sword), Weapon Specialization (bastard sword).

Evasion (Ex): If exposed to any effect that normally allows a character to attempt a Reflex saving throw for half damage, the Watcher takes no damage with a successful saving throw.

Possessions: *+1 glamered chain shirt,* large steel shield, *+1 shock bastard sword,* masterwork longbow, 20 arrows.

The Awakeners

This small but troublesome sect of cultists is perhaps the most persistent threat to the safety of N'gati's citizens. The Awakeners dwell in the forbidden deep reaches of the N'gati construct, in the tunnels where unknowing citizens first caused the Stirring. The group's goal is nothing less than the awakening of the construct—a feat its members hope to accomplish by digging deep into the N'gati's flesh until the creature comes to full awareness.

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Awakeners are almost always tieflings, and most are not legitimate citizens. The exact size of this group is unknown, but conservative estimates place it at one hundred members. The cult was once nearly double that size, but the Amber Watch has been slowly whittling away at its membership. The remaining Awakeners, recognizing the need to bolster their numbers, are considering attempting to smuggle in new converts from other realms, but they have not yet figured out an efficient way to do so.

The Awakeners do not worship a deity. The cult's leaders promote fanaticism and reinforce others' obsessions with awakening the ancient construct. The cult's clerics usually choose Destruction and War as their domains and wield shortspears in battle.

Average Awakener: Male or female tiefling Clr 7; CR 8; Medium-size outsider; HD 7d8; hp 31; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; AC 17, touch 13, flat-footed 15; Atk +8 melee (1d8+2/x3, *+1 shortspear*), or +9 ranged (1d8+2/x3, *+1 shortspear*); SA *darkness*; SQ darkvision 60 ft., outsider traits, resistances (cold 5, electricity 5, fire 5); AL CN; SV Fort +5, Ref +4, Will +9; Str 12, Dex 14, Con 11, Int 15, Wis 18, Cha 5.

Skills and Feats: Bluff -1, Concentration +10, Hide +14, Knowledge (arcana) +12, Knowledge (religion) +12, Spellcraft +12; Blind-Fight, Combat Casting, Spell Focus (Necromancy), Weapon Focus (shortspear).

***Darkness* (Sp):** A tiefling Awakener can use *darkness* once per day (caster level 7th).

Outsider Traits: A tiefling Awakener cannot be raised or resurrected (though a *wish* or *miracle* spell can restore life).

Spells Prepared (6/6/5/4/3; save DC 14 + spell level, or 16 + spell level for Necromancy spells): 0—*cure minor wounds, detect magic, guidance, mending, read magic, virtue;* 1st—*bane, cause fear, command, entropic shield, inflict light wounds*, obscuring mist;* 2nd—*calm emotions, desecrate, enthrall, shatter*, undetectable alignment;* 3rd—*cure serious wounds, dispel magic, magic vestment*, speak with dead;* 4th—*dismissal, divine power*, status.*

*Domain spell. **Deity:** None. **Domains:** Destruction (smite 1/day), War (Weapon Focus [shortspear] as a bonus feat).

Possessions: *+1 studded leather armor, +1 shortspear, +1 ring of protection, cloak of elvenkind, wand of cure light wounds, potion of bull's strength, potion of endurance.*

Visitors

Visitors to N'gati are common. The fact that a spellcaster can spend weeks here in relative safety developing magic items or researching new spells is an obvious draw. Powerful adventurers are fond of using N'gati as a place to rest and recuperate during an extended campaign on the Material Plane.

Each visitor to N'gati must obtain a pass in order to move freely within the city and gain access to its resources. A valid pass must be presented whenever a visitor attempts to make a purchase or enter an important structure. Amber Watchers may also demand passes from people they do not recognize on the street at any time.

Visitors arriving in N'gati via *astral fortresses* appear in the Grand Conduit Chamber in the Conduit Council Palace, where they are greeted by Amber

Watchers who explain the process of applying for passes. Those who arrive by other means are escorted to the Grand Conduit Chamber by Amber Watchers upon their first failure to present a pass.

Each new visitor undergoes a rigorous screening and interview process in the Amber Hall of the Conduit Council Palace, which is located at the base of the construct's remaining polar arm. One of the three current Council leaders administers the questioning, with at least three Amber Watchers present. The process is long and grueling, often taking more than a day, but it provides the Council with a detailed history and personality profile of the visitor. This in-depth personal information is then reviewed to ensure that the potential visitor is not in N'gati to aid the Awakeners or to bring harm to one of the citizens. Most applicants who endure the process are granted passes, though the Council is generally more wary about admitting high-level adventurers than lower-level ones.

OBTAINING A VISITOR PASS

There is no need to roleplay the entrance screening and interview process, since it would grow tedious very quickly. A character who merely wishes to visit N'gati and perhaps shop or engage the services of a resident must spend 3d6 hours of game time and make a successful Diplomacy check (DC 10 + the visitor's character level). Success indicates that the character obtains a one-week pass to N'gati. Failure means the visitor is turned away but may apply again in one month. Gaining a 1-week extension to a visitor pass requires a new interview (again lasting 3d6 hours) and make a new Diplomacy check (DC 10 + the visitor's character level + 2 per previous extension granted).

A character whose purpose in N'gati is nefarious or duplicitous must also make a successful Bluff check each time he applies for a visitor's pass or an extension. The Amber Watchers who assist with the interviews are well trained in the Sense Motive skill, so it is difficult to put anything over on them. Likewise, forged visitor passes must be extremely well crafted to hold up under scrutiny from an Amber Watcher.

A visitor who arrives in N'gati via an *astral fortress* is immediately offered full market value for the device by the Conduit Council. Anyone who refuses to sell is monitored carefully by an Amber Watcher, who is assigned to follow the character everywhere, keeping tabs on his or her activities and the condition of the item. A character who doesn't abuse the item's powers is usually allowed to keep it, although agents of the Conduit Council continue to make regular attempts to purchase it. Only in extreme cases are the Amber Watchers ordered to steal *astral fortresses* from visitors.

Citizenship

N'gati's population is officially set at exactly six thousand. No outsider can become a citizen unless an opening becomes available through the death or other permanent removal of an existing citizen. Even then, the process for obtaining citizenship makes the process for obtaining visitor passes look simple. When an opening for citizenship appears, each applicant undergoes a grueling interview that might last for months. The entire Conduit Council is involved in the interview and selection process, and the debates over which applicant would most benefit the city as a whole can drag on for years before a final decision is made.

CITIZENSHIP INTERVIEWS

A character who applies for N'gati citizenship must spend 3d6 weeks of game time interviewing. At the end of that period, he or she must make a successful Diplomacy check (DC 40, +2 per previous failed interview -2 for every Item Creation feat possessed, -1 for each Knowledge or Craft skill in which the applicant has at 5 ranks). If this check fails, the character may extend the interview by an additional 3d6 weeks and attempt another Diplomacy check at the end of that time. Such extensions are granted without limit, but each failure increases the DC for the required Diplomacy check.

Law and Order

The laws of N'gati are fairly simple. Only citizens have the right to build or sell in the city, and citizens have the right to work without interruption for as long as they desire. Theft, murder, vandalism, assault, and other violent crimes are illegal, and the perpetrators are dealt with as swiftly as possible by the Amber Watchers and the Council.

Punishment for any serious crime is usually banishment from N'gati, often with the aid of spells such as *dismissal*. In extreme cases, spells that do more than banish the target (such as *holy word*) might be implemented. This system of justice effectively limits violent crime to visitors, since N'gati's permanent citizens rarely wish to leave such a timeless utopia. In the rare cases in which banishment isn't effective (such as those in which the criminal could easily return to N'gati—or even worse—lead allies to it), imprisonment is the punishment of choice. N'gati has only one prison, but it is brutal and nearly impossible to escape (see below).

N'gati (small city): Magical; AL LN; 15,000-gp limit; Assets 4,500,000 gp; Population 6,000; Mixed (human 2,520, gnome 720, dwarf 480, halfling 480, mercane 420, tiefling 360, half-elf 300, bariaur 180, elf 180, githyanki 120, other 240).

Authority Figures: Therill Zoth, male human Wiz 18 (Conduit Council leader); Kalathni Svinn, female gnome Sor 16 (Conduit Council leader); Yamnu Kaskulak, male bariaur Rgr 3/Wiz 14 (Conduit Council leader).

Important Characters: Anyia Zoth, female human Clr 17 (Matriarch of Shimmerhall); Kepuralyar the Master Merchant, mercane Brd 3/Wiz 9; Bjorn Gristlebeard, male dwarf Ftr 10 (Warden of N'gati Prison).

Others: Amber Watchers (350); Awakeners (100).

IMPORANT LOCATIONS

The locations described below are the most important sites in the city, although the powerful inhabitants have created many other interesting locations. The majority of the buildings are residences. The remainder of the buildings are inns, taverns, or shops that cater to visitors.

Since hunger and thirst do not exist on the Astral Plane, there are no food stores in N'gati, and taverns are primarily public forums. Exotic drinks and food are served in such establishments simply for the entertainment of connoisseurs. The other shops that exist likewise cater to visitors or the whims of residents.

Ruins of Zoth Palace

This ruined building was originally the home of Yanirin Zoth. The structure suffered extensive damage during the Stirring, and the citizens of N'gati left it unrepaired as a monument to the bravery and sacrifice of their city's founder. Amber Watchers patrol the ruins regularly because Awakener cultists like to use the area as a hideout.

Amber Watcher Guardpost

These posts are placed throughout N'gati. Amber Watchers use them as staging grounds for military actions, as temporary holding cells, and as barracks. At any one time, 1d3 Amber Watchers can be found in or close to each of these guard posts.

N'gati Prison

This stark, square building has no windows and only one pair of massive iron doors. The prison is run by a severe and humorless dwarven fighter named Bjorn Gristlebeard. At any one time, 1d3+1 Amber Watchers are standing guard here.

Although the guards might seem a bit light in number, N'gati Prison is nearly impregnable. Each prisoner is forced to don a *robe of powerlessness* before being placed in a 10-foot cube. This "cell" is then sealed with a *wall of stone* in which the only openings are a few small air holes. No food or water is needed, so no entry point is required. Prisoners are usually left imprisoned for years on end and are often completely forgotten.

Grandmarket

A long, narrow strip of open ground, Grandmarket is easily the largest undeveloped area in the city. Nonetheless, the place is always packed with stalls and booths from which locals hawk their wares to visitors. All the buildings bordering Grandmarket (with the exception of Grandmarket Hall) are shops, inns, or taverns.

Grandmarket Hall

This impressive building is the home of Kepuralyar, a mercane bard/wizard who orchestrates all the business that goes on in Grandmarket. Only citizens of N'gati may sell their wares in town, and only those who receive proper clearance from Kepuralyar (who receives a percentage of all Grandmarket sales) are actually allowed to profit from such transactions.

APPLICATION TO USE AN EQUATOR TOWER

Any character wishing to secure the use of an equator tower must spend 2d4 hours of game time in interviews with the Conduit Council, then make a successful Diplomacy check (DC 30). The rental fee for one week is 300 gp + 2% of the final cost of any spells or magic items created in the tower.

Equator Towers

The equator towers are actually the petrified equatorial tentacles that ring N'gati. Each tentacle has been hollowed out and outfitted with a library, a study, or a laboratory for conducting magical or alchemical experiments. Each such facility can accommodate one researcher. These towers are invariably used by visitors, since the citizens have their own private facilities. Use of an equator tower must be negotiated through the Conduit Council.

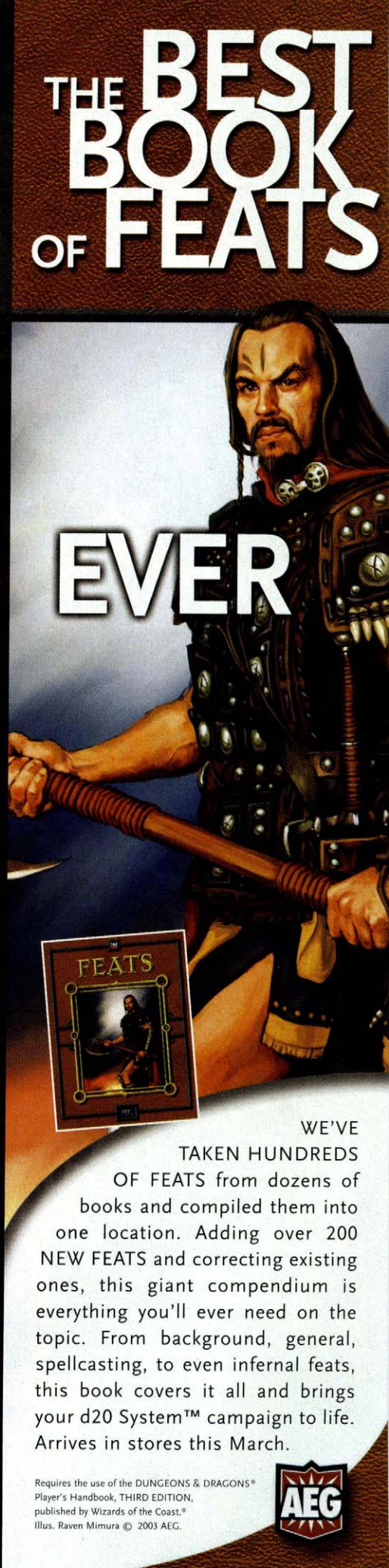
Shimmerhall

This massive structure, possibly the largest in N'gati, is made of magically treated sheets of amber and smoky glass. Shimmerhall houses no less than fifty-five shrines to various deities and pantheons scattered throughout the multiverse, along with numerous "generic" shrines that a visitor can use as desired. Unlike every other service in town, visitors can use these shrines for free, although charitable donations are appreciated. The Matriarch of Shimmerhall is a human cleric named Anyia, daughter of Zoth's son Sorel and sister of Therill Zoth.

Conduit Council Palace

Built entirely of magically hardened and opaque amber, this ring-shaped structure encircles the base of the N'gati construct's remaining polar arm. The arm itself has been hollowed out to accommodate the private quarters and libraries of the Council's leaders.

Anyone traveling to N'gati via an astral fortress arrives in the Grand Conduit Chamber in the Conduit Council Palace. The Amber Watchers maintain a headquarters in the lower chambers. D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FAITH AND HONOR

Piety for Non-Clerics

by Skip Williams · illustrated by Tim Lee

Deities exert profound and tangible influences over most D&D campaign worlds. The granting of divine spells is by far the most obvious such influence, and the impact of divine magic on a campaign is undeniable. After all, where would any hero be without those cure wounds and *raise dead* spells?

The influence of deities, however, goes far beyond a few spells. On many worlds, such beings have power over reality itself—it was they who shaped the world at the beginning of time and it is they who continue to keep it working, like clockmakers who continually maintain a vast, intricate timepiece. Deities have the power to bestow fortune or misfortune in many forms: fair weather or storms, fertile fields or erupting volcanoes, calm seas or tidal waves, peace or war, or even simply good luck or bad.

To anyone with a shred of common sense, it's obvious that a deity can be a powerful ally, even to someone who has no aptitude for divine spells. Mortals who aren't clerics can still find plenty of reasons for worship—if they didn't, the campaign world's temples would soon be out of business.

MOTIVATIONS FOR WORSHIP

The *Deities and Demigods* book suggests three basic motivations for mortal worship of a deity: love, gratitude, and fear. More complex motivations also exist, but most can be described as some combination of these three.

Love: A worshiper motivated by love has developed a personal attachment to the deity. Such a character's devotion is much like a young child's love for a parent or an older person's love for a cherished friend or mentor.

Gratitude: This worshiper has a slightly less personal relationship with the deity. Instead of love for the god, the character feels a deep respect for what the god represents or has accomplished. This worshiper's devotion is much like that of a citizen who admires civic leaders, police, or firefighters for their dedication to difficult jobs.

Fear: A worshiper motivated by fear has hardly any personal relationship with the deity at all. Such a character often simply wishes to appease the god to avoid his wrath. Alternatively, this worshiper might feel inadequate when compared to the deity or might fear what the deity represents rather than the deity itself.

PIOUS ARCHETYPES

Building a character's personality around his connection with a deity (or pantheon of deities) is a no-brainer when the character is a cleric, and the same tactic usually proves helpful for paladins, rangers, or other divine spellcasters. However, this technique can be just as useful for a character of any class. The character's faith—or lack thereof—can provide a solid basis for determining how he or she thinks, speaks, and acts. Religion, which provides both a course and a rudder for many lives, can become the underlying foundation for your character's life as well.

Each of the following character archetypes is based primarily on ties with a deity, a pantheon of deities, or a religious organization. Although the

descriptions below refer only to deities, any of these archetypes could involve any of those three religious affiliations.

Each archetype description begins with a short discussion of what such a character thinks is important and how she puts those values into practice. Next comes a discussion of the alignments that are most compatible with the archetype and how alignment might affect the way such a character thinks and acts. The description concludes with a short discussion of the classes that are most compatible with the archetype, and how a character's class affects her expression of the archetype. All the archetypes presented here are also appropriate for clerics and other divine spellcasters, but since those classes are not the focus of this article, they are not examined in detail.

An especially devoted admirer attempts to emulate her deity in every way, and an admirer usually wears her deity's holy symbol proudly.

The selection of archetypes presented here is intended to be a representative sampling, not a definitive list. Many more possibilities exist. In several cases, the archetypes overlap somewhat. The examples point out some areas of overlap, but most of the archetypes can be mixed and matched to create more complex or more complete characters. For example, the crusader and the defender of the faith complement each other nicely. On the other hand, an altruist crusader might produce a memorable character that's a real challenge to play.

Admirer

The admirer's deity is her idol and role model. She knows everything that is commonly known about her god, especially any myths or heroic tales in which he plays a leading role. The character's piety is founded on love, usually the sort of unconditional and fawning love that some modern-day people feel for favorite entertainers or sports figures.

An especially devoted admirer attempts to emulate her deity in every way she can. She might adopt her god's mode of dress and speech, use weapons he prefers, and undertake tasks, pastimes, or challenges he favors. An admirer usually wears her deity's holy symbol conspicuously and proudly. Occasionally an admirer shows a little more restraint, limiting herself to following her deity in thought and deed, and settling for some small memento of affection, such as a modest holy symbol or a suit of clothes worn only on special occasions.

A typical admirer views followers of other deities as members of rival factions, though this rivalry may be of a good-natured sort if the other deity is not the enemy of her own. She feels hostile toward people or activities that her deity opposes and regards the followers and clerics of rival deities as enemies.

Alignment

An admirer can be of any alignment, but she usually shares the alignment of the deity she venerates. The character's alignment has little effect on her devotion to her god, but it can affect how she shows it.

Chaotic: A chaotic admirer might develop quirky, personal ways to honor her deity, such as naming a weapon, pet, or child after the deity or after a similar item or being associated with it. For example, the deity Corellon Larethian carries a sword called Sahandrian. An admirer of Corellon might name her own sword Sahandrian or have a pet or familiar with that name.

Evil: Evil admirers have a penchant for sacrificing to their deities. They tend to value living, intelligent sacrifices most of all.

Good: These admirers usually strive to do benevolent deeds, which they dedicate to their deities.

Lawful: A lawful admirer might make a point of venerating her deity according to a strict schedule or an unvarying ritual that is repeated without fail. For example, an admirer devoted to a god of war might begin each battle with a prayer, fight only with the deity's favored weapon, or give thanks for each victory, no matter how minor.

Neutral: Since neutral characters are not usually given to excess, their admiration is usually a private matter. Neutral admirers are the most likely to moderate their public displays of affection for their deities.

Classes

Admirers can be found in roughly equal proportions among all the classes. Such a character typically chooses a class or class combination that allows her to identify with her deity most closely. For example, an admirer of Corellon Larethian might be a fighter, a wizard, or a fighter/wizard.

Altruist

The altruist recognizes his deity as the progenitor or caretaker of the mortal world (or at least of specific things within it) and seeks to pay homage by caring for whatever the deity cares about. Like the admirer, this character's piety springs from his love of the deity.

A typical altruist sees mortals as the children of the gods and seeks to honor his deity by promoting the common weal. Alternatively, he might focus on some other aspect of the world, such as nature in general, particular plants or animals, or activities (such as certain crafts or arts). In any case, the altruist believes he renders a service to his deity whenever he promotes or succors something or someone. He might see himself as a tool of his goddess and an extension of her will, or he might simply try to do things that please her.

Altruists protect their charges when necessary and work proactively when possible; thus their activities often parallel those of crusaders and defenders of the faith. Altruists, however, are usually content to let their work stand on its own merits, and they concern themselves primarily with the welfare of their charges rather than with maintaining their reputations or exacting vengeance.

Alignment

Most altruists are good-aligned and either lawful or chaotic, although a few

neutral ones exist. Altruism is utterly at odds with evil.

Chaotic: A chaotic altruist concerns himself with the well-being of individuals rather than groups.

Good: The typical altruist is good-aligned, working for the benefit of both his religion and his kind.

Lawful: This altruist strives to do the most good for the largest number of beings.

Neutral: Neutral altruists typically dedicate themselves to vast, impersonal concepts such as nature.

Classes

Barbarians, because of their intuitive relationship with the cosmos, often find altruism a natural choice. Bards, who wander far and often witness much suffering, might also find altruism a perfect fit. Fighters and monks sometimes practice an active, militant form of altruism focused on protecting the weak. Finally, though they are often distracted by a desire for personal gain, rogues can occasionally become somewhat altruistic as well.

Crusader

This character strives to meet some goal related to her deity. The goal might be specific, such as retrieving a lost idol, or general, such as ending poverty. The character's piety is usually based on love or gratitude.

Many a crusader also has some fear or even loathing for the enemies of her faith. A crusader who actively seeks out and destroys such foes is very similar to a defender of the faith (see below), but with an emphasis on offensive action and aggressive policy. A crusader who chooses a cause in response to an event that threatens or challenges her faith or church also shares some characteristics with defenders of the faith.

Crusaders do not necessarily spend all their time and energy trying to achieve their goals, but their goals are always in their thoughts. Some crusaders actively pursue their goals with single-minded devotion. (These characters share many characteristics with fanatics; see below.) Others push toward their goals only sporadically, as opportunities present themselves or as the mood strikes them. Occasionally a crusader takes no direct action at all, preferring instead to encourage others to take up the task.

Alignment

Most crusaders are chaotic, evil, good, or lawful. Almost none are neutral.

Chaotic: A chaotic crusader is usually concerned with righting something she feels is wrong. She might dedicate herself to rooting out corruption, undoing past injustices, or deposing officials she believes are incompetent or simply have served too long. The occasional chaotic crusader might even target her own faith for cleanup. Not surprisingly, such a character tends to be unpopular with defenders of the faith and fanatics of the same faith.

Evil: Most evil crusaders actively seek to bring down good. Alternatively, they might dedicate themselves to dismantling institutions that either interfere with the spread of evil or promote the concerns of the weak over those of the powerful.

Good: A good crusader most often tries to undo evil and oppose its spread. She might also devote herself to broad or continuing tasks that promote the common weal, such as feeding the poor, running hospitals, or providing for orphans.

Lawful: These crusaders are usually concerned with building or preserving things. Some seek to spread their faith by establishing temples in new areas; others campaign for laws that promote their ideals. Frequently, they seek to install rulers who are sympathetic to them or to keep such rulers in power.

Classes

Since most crusaders are people of action, this archetype is a natural for barbarians, fighters, and monks. Sorcerers and wizards seldom become crusaders, except in the service of deities of magic. Bards usually find the role of crusader too martial and too focused for their tastes, and many rogues also share this attitude.

Defender of the Faith

This character upholds the dignity of his deity and of his fellow worshipers. The defender of the faith protects his deity's holy places and clerics from destruction, desecration, or just plain slander. He remains ever vigilant for threats against the faith and is ready to act at any time. His piety is usually based on love, though he might also be motivated by fear—particularly if his deity or faith has a divine rival. (In this case, however, it is fear of the rival, not of the character's deity, that drives him.)

Although all defenders of the faith seek to protect and promote their religions, not all of them are particularly skilled or effective at doing so. Many prove artful and competent, easily turning aside disparagements or misrepresentations launched by detractors. Others, however, are tactless proselytizers who bully their peers and harass people of other religions. Some defenders of the faith actually work to master the tenets of their religions, while others are content to recite dogma by rote.

The defender of the faith protects his deity's holy places and remains ever vigilant for threats against the faith and its adherents.

Alignment

A defender of the faith can be of any alignment. Any character with this archetype works to counter tangible threats, such as the destruction of church buildings, the slaying of clerics, or theft of holy objects, but he might also have other priorities depending on his alignment.

Chaotic: A chaotic defender of the faith usually believes that his faith exists for the benefit of its followers, and that its specific tenets might be forced to change from time to time. He is more concerned with the faith becoming irrelevant to the faithful than he is about the faithful drifting away.

Evil: An evil defender of the faith usually strives to make sure that his faith serves him. He also makes every effort to undermine or eliminate the threat of good.

Good: A good defender of the faith does his best to keep his faith pure and unsullied by evil. He tries to ensure that the faith remains involved with the welfare of all its members, especially when it comes to protecting them from the influence of evil.

Lawful: A lawful defender of the faith might be concerned with laxness or backsliding among the faithful, or he might be more worried about subtle external threats, such as slander campaigns, the rise of rival groups, or the loss of political support for his faith.

Neutral: A neutral defender of the faith usually isn't worried about policing the faithful. Like the chaotic defender, he dreads the death of the faith through inaction or inflexibility, but he acknowledges that upholding the best traditions of the faith is often the most effective way to preserve it.

The doubter has measured herself against her god and found herself wanting, and a few come to believe that everyone is unworthy.

Classes

Many defenders of the faith are fighters or barbarians who use their martial skills to shield the faith or attack its rivals. Monks, with their fighting ability and disciplined outlook, also make excellent and devoted defenders of the faith. Rogues excel at the more subtle aspects of the role, especially when it comes to revealing hidden plots against the faith. Sorcerers and wizards often lack the spiritual conviction to become truly dedicated defenders of the faith, but their magical powers make them extraordinarily effective in the role. (Deities of magic, however, might attract large numbers of sorcerers and wizards who adopt this archetype.) Bards, with their mix of magical skills and powers of persuasion, make excellent defenders of the faith, though they too often suffer from lack of conviction.

Doubter

The doubter has measured herself against her god and found herself wanting. She strives to meet the godly ideal in mind, body, action, or some combination of the three. Fear motivates the doubter, but it's often a subtle fear. She might believe that all her efforts are doomed to failure, that she is too weak or stupid to meet her goals, or that her deity finds her efforts pathetic or laughable.

Doubters usually suffer in silence, keeping their insecurities to themselves and scoffing at any praise they receive. A few come to believe that everyone is unworthy; these doubters in particular tend to become cynical, abrasive, and quick to criticize.

Many doubters are driven to achieve great things, either in their own names or in the names of their deities, but their achievements seldom bring them any satisfaction. Other characters of this archetype devote themselves to helping others improve their lot as much as possible. Some doubters eventually come to accept their imperfections; others struggle against them all their lives. A scant few doubters eventually overcome their feelings of inadequacy, perhaps by finally understanding that they are in fact worthy enough to fit into an imperfect world, or that their ideals are simply unattainable.

Alignment

The typical doubter is good or chaotic (or both). Doubters are seldom evil or lawful, though exceptions do exist.

Chaotic: A chaotic doubter is acutely aware that things change and that chance plays a major role in any success or failure. Therefore, she might dismiss her accomplishments as mere good fortune and fear that her luck will change soon. Such a character might also see inevitable changes in her life and become convinced that she is not up to the task of dealing with them.

Evil: Evil characters often suffer from an excess of self-confidence. Still, an evil doubter might be evil simply because she feels insecure and burdened with self-doubt. Such a character's malevolent beliefs might actually serve as a form of self-protection or self-deception.

Good: A good doubter might wonder whether she really is as good as she can be (or should be). Such a character deems any setback a failure and feels unworthy whenever her efforts are blocked or unsuccessful.

Lawful: A lawful character tends to find comfort in her orderly life and the belief that she has a place in an orderly universe. Occasionally, however, such a character might perceive her place in a larger order, yet still feel unworthy to hold that place.

Classes

Rogues and bards, who often find themselves taking great risks against odds they cannot calculate, are especially prone to be doubters. As accomplished as they are, most of them realize that there's somebody better out there somewhere. The archetype is also prevalent among fighters, who might question their martial vocation as too crude, too violent, or simply too dangerous. Barbarian doubters are slightly more rare, but they share similar feelings. Few doubters are found among wizards and sorcerers—something about commanding inscrutable magical forces tends to give one's self-confidence a boost. Still, such a character might be aware that vast areas of magical knowledge are simply beyond her reach. Monks also are seldom doubters, thanks to the self-discipline needed for the class. Still, any monk strives for perfection of a sort and might come to believe that she ultimately will fall short of her goal.

Fanatic

Like the defender of the faith and the crusader, the fanatic is dedicated to performing great deeds in his goddess's name and to defending her and all she represents. The fanatic, however, represents the negative aspects of these other two archetypes. He has low tolerance for nonbelievers and thinks his deity will support him in all endeavors, no matter how large or small. As a consequence, fanatics are infamous for their refusal to give up, even in the face of a looming defeat.

Although a fanatic is partly motivated by respect for and gratitude to his deity, fear is his prime mover. His

continuing efforts to promote and venerate his goddess might make him seem like an admirer, but in actuality he fears that his efforts will fail to please her, or that she is always watching and judging him, ready to punish any shortcoming or defeat.

Alignment

Fanaticism is not unknown among good or neutral characters, but this archetype is most compatible with evil. Fanatics might be either lawful or chaotic, but they are more prevalent among lawful characters than chaotic ones.

Chaotic: Chaotic characters generally do not regard any idea or concept as greater than themselves, so they tend to be poor candidates for fanaticism. However, some chaotic characters so despise rigid codes of behavior and entrenched institutions that they become fanatical in their desire to eradicate such limitations.

Evil: Evil characters are usually willing to do anything they must to achieve their goals, and forgiveness and tolerance are alien concepts to them. Thus, an evil alignment is a perfect match for this archetype.

Good: Good characters—and their deities—are far less likely to be uncompromising and unsympathetic than their evil counterparts are, so good-aligned fanatics are rare. Nevertheless, good characters are seldom willing to compromise on moral issues and might become fanatical in certain circumstances.

Lawful: Characters of this alignment are somewhat prone to fanaticism, since they are usually willing to subordinate themselves to an idea or being that they regard as greater than themselves.

Neutral: Neutral characters tend to live and let live, so fanatics are rare among them. On occasion, however, one may become so dedicated to a broad concept (such as the supremacy of nature) that he becomes a fanatic.

Classes

Like crusaders, fanatics are people of action, so barbarians, fighters, and monks fit the archetype best. Barbarian rage, when well timed, often helps a fanatic overcome his foe. Likewise, a monk's host of special abilities can give a fanatic the necessary edge to persevere. Sorcerers and wizards seldom become fanatics, except in the service of deities of magic. Bards usually find the role of fanatic much too intense and shortsighted for their tastes. Rogues, like bards, often have a hard time feeling the burning passion that fanaticism requires, but their skills at stealth and silent killing make them very effective in the role.

> Fanatics are infamous for their refusal to give up even in the face of a looming defeat. They have low tolerance for nonbelievers

Nihilist

This archetype is the opposite of the altruist in many ways. The nihilist thinks mortals are like insects, beneath the notice of the gods and unworthy to share the same universe with them. To her this is not merely a belief, but a matter of fact. The nihilist thinks what happens in the mortal realm is unimportant, because it is peopled with unimportant beings and trivial objects. She might recognize that the gods created the world and continue to maintain it, but she is convinced that they view the world as a temporary plaything at best—something to be tossed aside or even destroyed once it ceases to be amusing.

Fear underlies the nihilist's thinking. In particular, she fears that an uncaring deity might smash her—or the whole cosmos—in a fit of pique or even by accident, in the same way that a human might tread on an ant and not know it.

Now and then a nihilist might be driven to outrageous acts out of a wild desire to appease some particular deity or escape some fate. The typical representative of this archetype, however, gives little regard to gods. She simply acts as she wishes, secure in the knowledge that her actions don't make a bit of difference in the grand scheme of things.

Alignment

The vast majority of nihilists are evil, though a fair number are neutral. Nihilism is incompatible with a good alignment. Characters of this archetype can be either lawful or chaotic.

Chaotic: A chaotic nihilist simply feels free to do whatever she wants, unfettered by consideration of the consequences or concern for others.

Evil: Evil, with its lack of sentiment, compassion, or guilt, particularly appeals to nihilists.

Neutral: The neutral character's contention that all actions and ideas are more or less equal fits in well with the nihilist belief that nothing has value.

Lawful: A lawful nihilist finds social structures and institutions helpful or at least convenient, though she doesn't assign them any meaning beyond obvious practical applications.

Classes

Sorcerers and wizards often find nihilism appealing because it frees them to devote all their attention to studying magic. Rogues, especially those who routinely break laws or violate social customs, often adopt this archetype as well. (The basic tenets of nihilism help to assure them that their victims have no rights worth acknowledging.) Barbarians who are prone to thoughtless destruction are frequently nihilists, as are many fighters with similar tendencies. Nihilist bards are rare, but some do exist. Most bards crave acceptance from others and believe that their music has the power to touch the infinite. Those who make their way by manipulating others and taking what they want, however, tend to find nihilism attractive for the same reasons that rogues do. Monks are almost unknown among nihilists. A monk's dedication to self-discipline and personal perfection usually leads her to reject nihilism.

Philosopher

Philosophers see events of the mortal world in terms of larger, universal truths. They regard deities as the embodiments of those truths, and their piety springs mostly from gratitude. Philosophers are invariably opinionated, but they frequently prove invaluable as advisors, planners, and problem-solvers.

GODLESS CHARACTERS

How might a character who decides to reject or defy the gods act? Probably not much differently than most other characters, except that the godless one has a big chip on his or her shoulder and might be asking for a whole lot of trouble.

Some godless characters fervently believe that there are no such things as gods. Others acknowledge that gods exist but insist that they are nothing more than powerful beings who have seized control of vast expanses of the cosmos in the same manner that robber barons seize control of mountain passes or stretches of river. This latter attitude might be fairly prevalent in campaigns that allow for the possibility of mortal ascension to godhood.

Curiously enough, several of the character archetypes presented in this article can work well for the godless character. Such a character's passionate belief that there are no gods (or that the gods are unworthy of worship) makes a ready substitute for devotion to a deity. Consider the following personal philosophies that such characters might adopt:

Godless Altruist: There's nobody out there taking care of the cosmos and making sure things get done right, so it's up to me to do it.

Godless Crusader or Fanatic: Tear down the churches; the gods are a sham!

Godless Nihilist: You had better look out for number one, because nobody else will.

Godless Philosopher: It's not the gods that hold the cosmos together, it's the ideas that live in the minds of sentient beings.

Although a philosopher might dedicate himself to any cause or creed, the typical example of this archetype prefers reflection and analytical thinking over combat. Nevertheless, he doesn't hesitate to fight when the time is right and he is properly prepared. Thanks to his focus on the larger picture, he seldom gives in to anger or despair. When moved to action, a philosopher can be as dedicated and stubborn as any crusader or fanatic.

Alignment

A philosopher can be of any alignment, but no matter what his moral and ethical views, he maintains his outward reserve and inner calm as much as possible. His alignment usually determines which truths he embraces and what might stir him to action.

Chaotic: Chaotic philosophers are typically concerned with issues of individual freedom, individual dignity, the iniquity of authority, self-sufficiency, and change.

Evil: These philosophers concern themselves with issues of power, gratification, exploitation, the nature of self-interest, and the irrelevancy of moral codes.

Good: Good philosophers ponder issues relating to respect for life, self-sacrifice, compassion, fairness, and justice.

Lawful: Philosophers who embrace law concern themselves with issues of honor, trustworthiness, tradition, obedience to authority, and self discipline.

Neutral: Neutral philosophers might be interested in any of the issues discussed above, but they often think in terms of pairs of opposing concepts, such as tradition versus change, or authority versus freedom.

Classes

Wizards and sorcerers, who use their minds to produce magical effects, make up the bulk of this archetype. Bards, who have both magical powers and ample opportunity to observe people at their best and their worst, are also prone to become philosophers. Rogues might become philosophical as they reflect on their activities, and the occasional monk also has a philosophical steak. Barbarians and fighters are rarely philosophers, since they tend to prefer action over thought and reflection.

FEATS FOR PIOUS CHARACTERS

Very pious characters can develop powers that border on the miraculous. This section presents feats that allow such characters to benefit directly from their close relationships with deities. All the feats below require the character to have a patron deity—that is, a deity that he or she has decided to worship.

Divine Channeler [General]

You can channel some divine energy to turn or rebuke undead.

Prerequisite: God Touched, patron deity.

Benefit: Once per day, you can turn or rebuke undead as a cleric of one-half your character level. If you are good-aligned (or a neutral worshiper of a good deity), this feat lets you turn undead. If you are evil-aligned (or a neutral worshiper of an evil deity), it lets you rebuke undead. If you are a neutral worshiper of a neutral deity, you can choose to either turn or rebuke upon taking the feat, but you cannot later change that decision.

Special: You can take this feat more than once, gaining one extra use per day of the turn or rebuke ability each time.

Divine Conduit [General]

You can lend your own divine power to a divine spellcaster of your faith.

Prerequisite: Charisma 13, Divine Channeler, patron deity.

Benefit: If you touch a divine spellcaster who worships the same deity as you do, you can expend one daily use of your turn/rebuke undead ability to boost that character's spellcasting power with your own divine energy. Such a transfer requires a standard action. The touched character can cast any one prepared spell at +1 caster level but must wait until his or her next turn to do so. Unused energy lasts 1 round before it fades. All divine energy transferred in this way is completely absorbed by the touched character and has no other effects.

Divine Fervor [General]

You can use divine energy to gain a temporary boost to an ability score.

Prerequisite: God Touched, patron deity.

Benefit: Once per day, you can call upon your deity and gain a +2 bonus to any one ability score. The bonus lasts 1 round plus a number of rounds equal to your Charisma bonus (if any).

Using this feat requires some divine power. You can expend either your daily use of the God Touched feat or one daily use of the turn/rebuke ability (if you have it) as a free action to provide the necessary energy. Alternatively, another character who worships the same deity as you do and has the turn/rebuke ability can expend one daily use of that ability to provide the necessary divine energy for you. To transfer the energy, the donor must touch you on his or

her turn. Such a transfer requires a standard action.

If you power the feat yourself, the benefit begins immediately. If you receive the necessary energy from another character, the benefit begins on your next turn. All divine energy transferred to you in this way is completely absorbed by your body and has no other effects.

Special: The benefits from this feat cannot be used at the same time as the benefits from the God Touched, Divine Fury, or Divine Fortification feats.

Divine Fortification [General]

You can use divine energy to gain temporary defensive bonuses.

Prerequisite: Divine Fervor, God Touched, patron deity.

Benefit: Once per day, you can call upon your deity and gain the following benefits:

- A deflection bonus to Armor Class equal to your Charisma bonus (if any) +1.
- Temporary hit points equal to your character level.
- A +2 bonus to Dexterity.

These benefits last a number of rounds equal to your Charisma bonus (if any) +1.

Using this feat requires some divine power. You can expend either your daily use of the God Touched feat or one daily use of the turn/rebuke ability (if you have it) as a free action to provide the necessary energy. Alternatively, another character who worships the same deity as you do and has the turn/rebuke ability can expend one daily use of that ability to provide the necessary divine energy for you. To transfer the energy, the donor must touch you on his or her turn. Such a transfer requires a standard action.

If you power the feat yourself, the benefit begins immediately. If you receive the necessary energy from another character, the benefit begins on your next turn. All divine energy transferred to you in this way is completely absorbed by your body and has no other effects.

Special: The benefits from this feat cannot be used at the same time as the benefits from the God Touched, Divine Fervor, or Divine Fury feats.

Divine Fury [General]

You can temporarily become a fighting powerhouse using the power of divine energy.

Prerequisite: Divine Fervor, God Touched, patron deity.

Benefit: Once per day, you can call upon your deity and gain the following benefits:

- An increase to your base attack bonus equal to your Charisma bonus (if any) +1. If this increase raises your base attack bonus enough to grant additional attacks per round, you gain those as well for the duration of the effect.
- Temporary hit points equal to your character level.
- A +2 bonus to Strength.

These benefits last a number of rounds equal to your Charisma bonus (if any) +1.

Using this feat requires some divine power. You can expend either your daily use of the God Touched feat or one daily use of the turn/rebuke ability (if you have it) as a free action to provide the necessary energy. Alternatively, another character who worships the same deity as you do and has the turn/rebuke ability can expend one daily use of that ability to provide the necessary divine energy for you. To transfer the energy, the donor must touch you on his or her turn. Such a transfer requires a standard action.

If you power the feat yourself, the benefit begins immediately. If you receive the necessary energy from another character, the benefit begins on your next turn. All divine energy transferred to you in this way is completely absorbed by your body and has no other effects.

Special: The benefits from this feat cannot be used at the same time as the benefits from the God Touched, Divine Fervor, or Divine Fortification feats.

God Touched [General]

Your deity has recognized your devotion and gifted you with a small spark of divine power.

Prerequisite: Patron deity.

Benefit: Once per day, while performing an act related to one of your deity's portfolios, you can call upon your deity as a free action and gain a +1 luck bonus on any one die roll. For example, a character devoted to Moradin (whose portfolios are dwarves, creation, smithing, engineering, and war) could gain a +1 luck bonus on any attack or damage roll, a Craft check, a Profession (engineer) check, or a Knowledge check relating to dwarves or dwarf history.

Although contemplative by nature, when moved to action, a philosopher can be as dedicated and stubborn as any crusader or fanatic.

Special: You can take this feat only once. The God Touched feat is incompatible with the Disciple of Darkness and Thrall to Demon feats from the *Book of Vile Darkness*. If you have either of those feats, you cannot take this one, and if you have the God Touched feat, you cannot subsequently take either of those feats.

The benefit of this feat cannot be used at the same time as the benefits from the Divine Fervor, Divine Fury, or Divine Fortification feats.

Minor Divine Spellcaster [General]

You can cast orisons.

Prerequisite: Charisma 13, Divine Channeler, patron deity.

Benefit: Upon taking this feat, you gain knowledge of four orisons of your choice from the cleric spell list. Each day, you can cast three of these spells, in any combination, without preparing them, in the same manner as a sorcerer knows and casts spells. The save DC (if any) for each such spell is 10 + your Charisma modifier. Your caster level for these spells is one-half your character level.

Special: You can take this feat multiple times, gaining one extra orison known and one extra spell slot per day each time. However, you cannot know more than seven orisons or cast more than six orisons per day by virtue of this feat.

Minor Divine Spellcaster does not affect and is not affected by the

spellcasting ability of any other class you have or subsequently gain. The orisons gained from the two sources are treated separately in all ways. For example, if you gain levels as a cleric after taking this feat, you still know the orisons you gained from this feat,

Very pious characters can develop powers that border on the miraculous, and taking a divine feat might be a prelude to multiclassing as a cleric.

have the same number of slots per day for them, and cast them as a caster of one-half your character level. The orisons you gain for being a cleric must be chosen daily from the list and prepared normally, and your caster level for those is equal to your cleric level plus any adjustments you would normally be entitled to because of domains or other factors.

Seer [General]

You receive flashes of insight from your god.

Prerequisite: Charisma 13, Divine Channeler, patron deity.

Benefit: You gain a +1 luck bonus on Listen, Search, Sense Motive, and Spot checks.

In addition, you can call upon your god once per day for limited information about the future in general, though this usage of the feat temporarily depletes your capacity for divine insight. The effect is similar to that of an *augury* spell, except that there is no material component and you can see only about 10 minutes into the future. This usage of the feat is a spell-like ability requiring a full-round action. Once you have used the feat in this way, the luck bonus it normally provides is negated for 1d4+1 rounds.

ITEMS FOR PIOUS CHARACTERS

Pious characters might find the following items useful during a campaign.

Beads of Divine Power

These small beads resemble prayer beads, but each stores a set amount of positive or negative energy. Positive energy beads are golden and warm to the touch; negative energy beads are dead black and cool to the touch. A bead of divine power can be used in two ways.

Powering Turn/Rebuke Attempts: A character with the ability to turn undead can use a positive bead to gain an extra daily use of his or her turning ability, or to power any ability that consumes turning energy (such as the Divine Fervor feat presented in this article, or the divine feats in the *Defenders of the Faith* book). A negative bead can be used in a similar fashion by a character who can rebuke undead. Good characters cannot use negative beads for this purpose, and evil characters cannot use positive beads. A neutral character who has chosen to channel positive energy (by deciding to turn undead) uses positive beads for this purpose, and one who has chosen to channel negative energy (by deciding to rebuke undead) uses negative beads. A neutral character who has not yet made that choice must do so prior to using a bead, and that decision remains in force should such a character ever gain the power to turn or rebuke undead.

Ranged Weapon: A *bead of divine power* can be hurled as a grenadelike missile with a range increment of 10 feet. Upon impact, it explodes in a 10-foot burst and deals 3d8+10 points of positive or negative energy damage (depending on the type of bead) to every creature in the area. A creature actually struck by the bead is not allowed a saving throw, but anyone else caught in the blast may attempt a Reflex saving throw (DC 16) for half damage.

Caster Level: 10th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *cure moderate wounds* or *inflict moderate wounds,* ability to turn or rebuke undead; **Market Price:** 1,250 gp; **Cost to Create:** 625 gp + 50 XP; **Weight:** —.

Holy Symbol of the Devotee

This silver holy symbol is suitable for use in spellcasting. It also has additional powers as noted below when worn by a character of the appropriate faith and activated with the proper command words.

For up to 2 hours each day, the *holy symbol of the devotee* can provide the wearer with a *protection from chaos, protection from evil, protection from good,* or *protection from law* effect (wearer's option). The wearer need not use the benefit all at once, and he or she can freely switch between effects simply by speaking a different command word. For example, a wearer could activate the holy symbol with one command word and select a *protection from evil* effect. An hour later, he could discontinue that effect for 2 hours, then speak another command word to activate the *protection from law* effect. A third command word spoken half an hour after that could change the effect to *protection from chaos.*

In addition, for up to 2 hours each day, the wearer can use *detect chaos, detect evil, detect good,* or *detect law.* Each effect is similar to the spell of the same name, except that it reacts only to auras within 5 feet of the wearer, and the wearer need not concentrate to maintain the effect. When the holy symbol detects an aura within range, it automatically glows briefly; the stronger the aura, the brighter the glow. An overwhelming aura blinds the wearer and every creature within 5 feet for 1d4 rounds (Fortitude DC 15 negates). As with the protection function, the wearer need not use the benefit all at once, and he can freely switch between effects simply by speaking a different command word.

Caster Level: 6th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *detect chaos, detect evil, detect good, detect law, glyph of warding, protection from chaos, protection from evil, protection from good, protection from law;* **Market Price:** 21,000 gp; **Cost to Create:** 10,500 gp + 840 XP; **Weight:** —.

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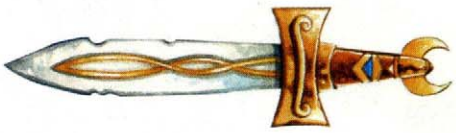
BEAR THE INVINCIBLE BLADE

by Robin D. Laws · illustrated by Jeff Laubenstein



LEARN TO FIGHT WITH FLAIR

What's an honest warrior to do? Sometimes it seems like those pesky spell-casters have all the fun. Just because they can whip up a few flashy spells, they act like they've cornered the market on cool things to exclaim during combat.

"Stand back, vile varlets, or face the uncompromising wrath of my color spray!"

"Quail, pusillanimous poltroons, at the horrifying power of my vampiric touch!"

"Never fear, my boon companions! We shall be spared a dire fate by dint of my ethereal jaunt!"

No matter how puny the effects they wield, those haughty wizards and self-righteous clerics carry on as if their supernatural summonings were the be-all and end-all of dungeon-delving and foe-smiting. Uncompromising wrath? Of *color spray*? Hogwash! *Color spray* is just a puny 1st-level spell that knocks out wimpy creatures and momentarily blinds or stuns tougher ones, and while your wizard is casting it, you're mowing down opponents left and right with your greatsword, dealing mammoth quantities of damage thanks to your Improved Critical (greatsword) feat. And what credit do you get for it? None! It's all ethereal this and elemental that!

The reason the magic types can hog the spotlight so well is because their signature actions have built-in cool names. They didn't even have to make up the names themselves; that verbiage came prepackaged with their prefab spell lists! From there, all a wizard or cleric has to do is build a few fancy words around one of those spell names, and presto! A perfect route to glory.

Well, grumble and curse no more, proud practitioners of the whup-ass arts! You can easily remedy the situation by slapping cool names of your own on the moves you most often perform in combat. The next time you dish out a 22-point critical hit, everyone will remember it. Why? Because it won't just be a generic 22-point critical hit anymore; it'll be your patented hideous rain of death!

COMBAT FLOURISHES

A combat flourish is a catchphrase that you exclaim when your character performs a particular combat action. Good candidates for flourishes are a standard attack, a signature combat maneuver, or a particular feat.

Catchphrases are nothing new to adventure fiction; genre writers have used them for years to highlight the personalities of their key characters. Many such phrases are so memorable that the words themselves bring the characters to mind. Who could forget Sherlock Holmes springing into action as he cried "The game is afoot," or the

Thing roaring "It's clobberin' time!" Use of a catch-phrase during play can make your character seem memorable and distinctive, whether you tie it to a specific combat action or not. For more advice on non-combat catchphrases, see "Catchphrases" in issue #294.

Combat flourishes make good catch-phrases because they're snappy and simple. The tie-in with a combat action tells you when to use them, so you don't forget. Beginning players in particular might find combat flourishes an easy, straightforward way to build personality into their PCs.

THEMES FOR FLOURISHES

The way you describe your moves should tell the listeners something about your character. Decide, if you haven't already, how and where he learned to fight. Was he trained in his father's opulent manor house by the family dueling tutor? Did he learn to defend himself in a tough, dingy neighborhood populated by thieves and alley rats? Perhaps he climbed a mystic mountain to beg an ancient master of the esoteric arts for tutelage. Or maybe he was drilled night and day by an uncompromising, hard-headed sergeant in a standing army or mercenary company.

Usually, the philosophy and style of your character's training determines the theme of your combat flourishes. Power Attack has the same effect whether you learned it from an orc chieftain or an seasoned pit fighter, but those trainers probably described it in radically different ways. It is possible, however, to have a character whose verbal style doesn't match the circumstances of his training. For example, Sir Ranulf might use the parlance of a classically trained fencer to disguise the fact that he began his career as a scruffy street urchin.

USING FLOURISHES

Below are a number of specific combat themes. Each entry provides some general background information on characters for whom that theme is appropriate, notes on how to create flourishes for that theme, and example flourishes for the most common combat actions and feats.

First choose a theme for your character, based on your concept of her background and training. Then figure out which combat moves she uses most often and decide on flourishes for them. You can adopt the sample phrases given for that theme if you wish, but it's even more fun to make them up yourself.

In most cases, you'll want to pick only a few phrases. If you choose too many, you'll have trouble remembering them all, and they'll have less impact on the rest of your group. On the other hand, you might want to portray a show-off or a combat-obsessed character who blathers incessantly about his martial prowess, and a wider variety of catch-phrases could be appropriate for that. But as with any deliberately annoying character trait, be sure that your players and DM find the character's obsession as amusing as you do.

So don't let the spellcasters steal center stage again! Peruse the offerings below and then give them back some of their own!

Classical Swordsmanship

This style is inspired by European fencing. It works well for a character of noble family from a medieval or renaissance culture.

Background: You were trained in a highly formalized style of fighting designed primarily for use in duels of honor, which happen

frequently among members of your social class. Your trainer might have been a professional teacher retained by your family, or perhaps a relative. He gave you personal attention throughout the training process, sculpting your movements and reactions for quickness, grace, and style.

Your mastery of this style is a mark of wealth and taste. Although you might now use it to dispatch dread demons and dungeon denizens, the style is meant for settling disputes between nobles. You were taught that it is nearly as shameful to win a duel gracelessly as it is to lose one altogether. (On the other hand, the effects of an embarrassing or lucky victory are much less permanent than those of a deadly defeat.)

Flourishes: No real-world combat discipline maps completely to the swashbuckling, fantastic style of D&D combat, so it's usually necessary to embellish (or replace) existing terminology with words that sound appropriate. Names for fencing maneuvers are French or Spanish, so they tend to sound exotic and stylish to English-speakers. Your flourishes should make use of that impression. When devising new names for your combat maneuvers, use a French-English or Spanish-English dictionary, or use one of the various translator sites found on the Internet like the Babelfish translator at **http://babelfish.altavista.com/translate.dyn**. If no one in your group speaks the language in question, you can gleefully disregard linguistic accuracy. If someone does, you can rope him or her into helping you invent suitably impressive-sounding new terms or even new themes.

The phrases used below are derived from real-world fencing terms, but most have been embellished to sound both appropriate and exotic. The faux-French terms describe obviously forceful moves with distaste, while their pseudo-Spanish counterparts allow for a greater degree of machismo and bravado.

Standard Attack: *"Ataque estándar!"* or *"Attaque typique!"*

Fighting Defensively: *"Pris de fer!"*

Total Defense: *"Defensa vergonzosa!"* or *"Valor discrétionnaire!"*

Cleave: *"Sable feroz!"* or *"Saber de gauche!"*

Combat Reflexes: *"Riposte!"*

Dodge: *"Regate!"* or *"Détour élégant!"*

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: *"Ajustement insignifiant!"*

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: *"Impôt de l'ajustement!"*

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: *"Prolongation malheureuse!"*

Great Cleave: *"Sable muy feroz!"* or *"Grand coup inélégant!"*

Improved Bull Rush: *"Asimiento de la dominación!"* or *"Affichage brut!"*

Improved Critical: *"Huelga devastadora!"* or *"Coup adroit!"*

Power Attack: *"Fleche!"*

Spring Attack: *"Balestra!"*

Whirlwind Attack: *"Ataque del torbellino!"* or *"Danse de boucherie!"*

> TO A SWASHBUCKLER, IT IS NEARLY AS SHAMEFUL TO WIN A DUEL GRACELESSLY AS IT IS TO LOSE ONE ALTOGETHER.

Chivalric

Like classic swordsmanship, this theme is appropriate for someone of noble background. A character using this theme, however, was trained for mounted warfare rather than dueling.

Background: You were raised to fight in heavy armor, on or off a horse. In all likelihood, you come from a noble background and can point to a long line of equally martial ancestors. When making war for your liege, you become part of an elite, equestrian shock troop that dominates the battlefield, running over grubby, squalid infantrymen with lordly abandon. When at play, you direct blows at your fellow knights as you engage in displays of single combat and in the most splendid contest of all—the joust.

Steeped in the codes of chivalry, you've devoured volumes of epic poetry in which knights kill one other and suffer tortured love for maidens who cannot be theirs. Your appreciation of such literature and the culture behind it forms the foundation for your exclamations in combat and much of your motivation for adventuring.

Flourishes: Use poetic terms for your favorite battle maneuvers. Most of those given below reference the epic poem *Chanson de Allandra,* which any self-respecting knight knows by heart. Many use the names of characters from the poem: the brave Pepin, the righteous Adrian, and Allandra, the mysterious warrior-woman whose love for both knights leads to melancholy doom for all.

To create new flourishes for this theme, haul out your thesaurus and pry loose its most flowery and obscure terms.

Fighting Defensively: "Bridge of Pepin!"

Total Defense: "Allandra's stand!"

Cleave: "Efflorescing blow!"

Combat Reflexes: "Just resurgence!"

Dodge: "Blessing of St. Alibert!"

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "The moat at Alambar!"

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Adrian's cunning!"

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Pepin at Orc-Mount!"

Great Cleave: "Sword of Montcrief!"

Improved Bull Rush: "'Friar's charge!"

Improved Critical: "Exalted on a spear!"

Power Attack: "Pepin's last!

Spring Attack: "Leap from Guillemond's Hill!"

Whirlwind Attack: "Gale of Doom!"

Infantry Fighting

This theme is based on the common medieval foot soldier. It is most appropriate for a down-to-earth fighter who gained his early experience as a soldier.

Background: You are no effete, puffy-shirted nobleman who learned to fight with a silver spoon in his mouth. Nor are you a wealthy, landed knight encased safely in plate armor, wearing a helmet topped with a feathery plume. Your aching back, grime-caked skin, and world-weary attitude all mark the time you spent as a common foot soldier. You learned to fight alongside a mass of other men while a cruel, hardened drillmaster shouted instructions and obscenities at you in equal measure. You honed your experience knee-deep in mud, clashing sword and shield against the enemy, while comrades died in droves around you. Courage, discipline, and luck were your protectors.

Flourishes: Combat flourishes for this theme should be blunt and straightforward, arising either from real-life infantry practices or from the common soldier's gallows humor. When delivering them, bark them out in a drill sergeant's grunt—the less intelligible they are, the better. If your game group has developed a tolerance for salty language, you might insert some ripe obscenities into their your dialogue as well. The movie *Full Metal Jacket* can provide you with plenty of inspiration, though any epithets borrowed from it should, of course, be altered to fit a medieval mood.

Standard Attack: "Charge!"
Fighting Defensively: "Raise shields!"
Total Defense: "@#*%!"
Cleave: "Downthrust!"
Combat Reflexes: "Got you now!"
Dodge: "Every man for himself!"
Expertise: Varies, as below.
-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "Is that so?"
-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Think you're tough, do you?"
-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Merciful gods, defend me!"
Great Cleave: "Downthrust—hunnhh!"
Improved Bull Rush: "Shield charge!"
Improved Critical: "Die, you swine, die-e-e-e-e-ee!"
Power Attack: "Kill!"
Rapid Shot: "Shoot the swine down!"
Spring Attack: "Over the top!"
Whirlwind Attack: "Die, die, die, die, all you swine!"

Technical

The technical theme stresses the study of tactics in a theoretical as well as a practical sense. It is most appropriate for a character who is cool and calculating in battle and not given to flowery excess in speech or manner.

Background: Your schooling in the arts of war was cold and technical, delivered by an instructor who argued that all possible maneuvers could be calculated and regimented according to a system based on functionality. As a product of this strange new philosophy (which is sometimes known as *science*), you disdain those who spout colorful metaphors to steel their courage in battle. Instead, you identify each maneuver with a clear and simple term that actually describes the nature or purpose of the move. You try to avoid smirking when others belt out their laughably primitive names for basic physical interactions. If only everyone in your party would adopt these obvious terms, communication in combat would become infinitely simpler.

Flourishes: When using this theme, shout out simple, mechanistic terms for your maneuvers, as if teaching your fellow party members how to fight. Adopt a superior air, as if taking special glee in overcoming your clumsy and unschooled opponents. If your battlecries sometimes sound like gloating, all the better.

When creating new flourishes, you might find the rules terms for various combat actions perfectly suitable as is. Latin words, numbers, and physics terms can also lend a scientific air to the proceedings.

Standard Attack: "Simple strike!"
Fighting Defensively: "Defensive mode!"
Total Defense: "Testudo maneuver!"
Cleave: "Half fulcrum!"
Combat Reflexes: "Advantage—mine!"
Dodge: "Dodge—ha!"
Expertise: Varies, as below.
-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "Lateral parry!"
-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Downward parry!"
-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Whirlwind parry!"
Great Cleave: "Full fulcrum!"
Improved Bull Rush: "Acceleration attack!"
Improved Critical: "Point of weakness—found!"
Power Attack: "Maximum force!"
Rapid Shot: "Hystrix maneuver!"
Spring Attack: "Upward leverage!"

NAMED WEAPONS

The quickest and easiest way to add verbal panache to your hacking and slashing is to give your weapon a distinctive name that you can shout as part of your battlecry.:

"Tremble before the power of the All-Crusher!"

"You shall laugh no longer, when you dangle on Mistan's Spear!"

The style-conscious fighter need not wait until the heat of melee to mention the name of her weapon. She can do so while merely anticipating combat.:

"Copper Fang hungers for the foeman's blood!"

"He will face the swift justice of Afflicter—this I swear!"

If you forget to mention your weapon before or during combat, you can remedy your error during the post-fight analysis:

"Those who fled will tell their fellows of Silverflame's might!"

"Ha! Surestriker taught them a thing or two!"

Don't think that your sword or spear has to be magical to merit a name. Although it helps if your weapon is an obvious work of art, with gleaming surfaces, distinctive designs, and glittering jewels, even the humblest blade or hammer seems wondrous when given a suitably impressive name. When you finally lay your hands on a magic version of your favorite weapon, only the most churlish of companions would chide you for discarding the original and transferring the name to its upgraded equivalent.

Some DMs, especially those of the epic storyteller persuasion, might reward you for making your weapon sound impressive and interesting. Although you can't count on such a boon, a DM who finds your efforts worthy might just allow you to discover the true power of a seemingly mundane weapon, instead of finding some unrelated magic item during an adventure. Such a discovery might come laden with plot hooks; for example, you might investigate the ancient crypt in which the legendary original owner of your now-magic sword is interred. This journey might expose you to additional dangers, but it gives you a place firmly in the middle of the spotlight. And besides, what do mighty warriors with famous weapons live for, if not for danger?

Whirlwind Attack: "Whirlwind attack!"

Pit-Fighter Taunting

This theme takes its inspiration from both street-fighting and gladiatorial combat. Use it for a lower-class character who has fought before audiences.

Background: On the harsh streets of a large city, you learned that fighting dirty was the only way to survive. Thieves, ne'er-do-wells, and bullies were your tutors, delivering their lessons with their fists, feet, elbows, and makeshift weapons.

Finally, in an earthen pit at an undisclosed location outside of town, you discovered that your hard-earned talents could be profitable. Hundreds of nameless faces gathered to watch as you theatrically demonstrated your combat prowess in the fighting ring, and they poured the contents of their purses on you when you won. As a professional battler, you gradually learned that the most flamboyant and vocal fighters won the largest rewards. So you resurrected the taunts of your childhood days, exclaiming them at dramatically appropriate moments, and you prospered.

You have moved from the ring to the dungeon, but you haven't shaken your habit of taunting the enemy. Your histrionics might be lost on foes that speak only the languages of orcs or goblins, but what do you care? Some say your taunts are childish or—even worse—rehearsed. Anyone who says it too loudly, though, might get smacked on the back of the head with the nearest chair.

Flourishes: To get inspiration for new flourishes, tune in a wrestling show on TV and alter the references as needed to fit the fantasy genre. Or just remember the dumbest, most annoying things you ever yelled on the playground at the age of seven.

Standard Attack: "Eat steel, maggot!"

Fighting Defensively: "You can't hit me! You can't hit me!"

Total Defense: "You're getting tired! You're getting tired!"

Cleave: "Butcher blow!"

Combat Reflexes: "Think you're smart, do you? I'll show you who's smart!"

Dodge: "Blind man! Blind man!"

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "I know that move!"

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Your mother hits harder than that!"

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "You'll never touch me!"

Great Cleave: "Welcome to the chopping block!"

Improved Bull Rush: "Stompdown!"

Improved Critical: "I crush your head!"

Power Attack: "You are pummeled now! *Pummeled!*"

Rapid Shot: (make a sound like whooshing arrows)

Spring Attack: "Total puma leap!"

Stunning Fist: "Stunning fist!"

Whirlwind Attack: "Multiple ultra death!"

Eastern Martial Arts

This theme is based on the martial arts genre as it exists in film and story. It is most appropriate for characters who have training as monks or other martial arts experts.

Background: After years of grueling training in a monastery, where you lived a humble life of constant training and spiritual contemplation, your snowy-haired masters bowed and declared you a master of the martial arts. With true humility, you now stride through the world in search of truth, but when the enemies of harmony and balance threaten the innocent, you must use your vaunted skills to end the menace. It is only natural that, as part of your mission to instruct others, you would shout out the names of the various moves as you execute them, bringing cheer to the defenseless and throbbing pain to the guilty.

Flourishes: The names of your combat moves are dramatic, though sometimes they sound as though they have been awkwardly translated from another language. Almost invariably they follow an "A-B-C" pattern, where A is a hyperbolic and multisyllabic adjective, B is an adjectival noun that often describes an animal or other part of the natural world, and C is a noun representing a combat action ("Hideous cancer blow!"). Occasionally, the formula reverses itself to C of the A-B ("Slash of the vengeful serpent!").

ON THE HARSH STREETS OF A LARGE CITY, YOU LEARNED THAT FIGHTING DIRTY WAS THE ONLY WAY TO SURVIVE.

Standard Attack: "(Name of your school)-style kung fu!" ("Shaolin-style kung fu!" or "Green Mountain-style kung fu!")

Fighting Defensively: "Frustrating monkey leap!"

Total Defense: "Invincible crab stance!"

Cleave: "Unstoppable eagle's claw!"

Combat Reflexes: "Impetuous cobra's tooth!"

Deflect Arrows: "Omnipresent crab gesture!"

Dodge: "Caper of the monkey!"

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "Drunken monkey roll!"

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Drunken monkey turn!"

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Drunken monkey shudder!"

Great Cleave: "Shattering eagle's claw!"

Improved Bull Rush: "Thundering bull's hoof!"

Improved Critical: "Lethal mantis bite!"

Power Attack: "Puncturing dragon blow!"

Rapid Shot: "Stance of the merciless hurricane!"

Spring Attack: "Inevitable tiger spring!"

Stunning Fist: "Stunning mountain fist!"

Whirlwind Attack: "A thousand crane beaks!"

Wizardly

This theme applies the wizard's erudite and flashy language to physical combat maneuvers. It is most appropriate for multiclass characters who combine fighting and spellcasting classes.

Background: Most people think of wizards as sedentary beings who are comfortable dispensing long-distance fireballs but loath to dirty their hands in the hurly-burly of direct melee combat. Your extensive training in the wizardly arts of self-defense proves otherwise. Knowing that sometimes the most effective expenditure of energy is a simple yet surprising sock to the jaw, wizards long ago perfected *estabat quendic*—a system of armed and unarmed combat that derives its logic from the same mystical and geometric principles that underlie the mightiest spells. Just like the incantations that fill your spellbook, each maneuver associated with this esoteric combat art has its own distinctively flavorful name, which can be shouted out in midfight to dazzle the ears of the uninitiated.

Flourishes: Before naming new maneuvers of *estabat quendic,* dust off your old *Dr. Strange* comics and immerse yourself in mystic mumbo jumbo. The primary rule is that maneuver names should sound like spells. Often they utilize an X-of-Y-Z pattern, where X describes the action, Z is the proper name of a place or entity, and Y is a flowery, alliterative adjective describing the place or entity. An alternate structure is A-B of the Cs, where A is a number, B is a plural noun describing the action you're taking, and C is a place or entity. Other maneuver names may sound like principles of physics or laws of magic.

Standard Attack: "Aha! You did not expect me to be adept in the mundane arts of war, but a true wizard's training includes a mastery of the physical as well as the mystical realm!" (This prolix exclamation is best used sparingly.)

Fighting Defensively: "Buckler of ever-bright Edinshore!"

Total Defense: "Seven shields of the seraphim!"

MAKE UP ORC-SOUNDING WORDS AND GRUNT THEM WITH GUSTO. IF IT DOESN'T SOUND HALF-GARGLED, IT ISN'T ORC.

Cleave: "Razory hammer of Rahan-Nesh!"

Combat Reflexes: "Equal and opposite reaction!"

Deflect Arrows: "Raging mists of Racil-Hoth!"

Dodge: "Sixteen circles of Shaka-Tor!"

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "Phan Tor's first principle!"

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Phan Tor's third principle!"

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Phan Tor's fifth principle!"

Great Cleave: "Dread vengeance of Rahan-Nesh!"

Improved Bull Rush: "Battering blows of Baran-Dur!"

Improved Critical: "Seeking shards of Sharok-Nūr!"

Power Attack: "Unerring emphasis of Unoth-Zaad!"

Rapid Shot: "Mothok-Mor's manifold missiles!"

Spring Attack: "Leap of feral Fo-Hor-Chak!"

Stunning Fist: "Reverberating thump of Thutak!"

Whirlwind Attack: "Blaze of blood-mad Baran-To!"

Orc

Orcs love to fight, so this theme is a natural for any fighting character who has orc blood.

Background: Orcs taught you to fight. Fighting is the most important thing in life to orcs, and their culture (if it can be called such) reflects that fact. There are 712 words for "hit" in the Orc tongue, but only one word for "love". (Well, two if you count the variant used in the sentence "I love to hit people.") This cornucopia of battle verbiage makes the terms for orc combat maneuvers difficult to translate, so you never try. Who cares whether your enemies understand? Your friends will understand if they're orcs; if they're not, it's probably better that they don't know what you said.

Flourishes: To create flourishes for this theme, it's best just to make up Orc-sounding words and grunt them with gusto. Use suitably guttural-sounding noises to simulate the Orc tongue, concentrating primarily on harsh, grating sounds. If it doesn't sound half-gargled, it isn't Orc.

Standard Attack: "Hur-*unh*-hah!"

Fighting Defensively: "Kweeerrrr-*nek*!"

Total Defense: (hiss peevishly through your teeth)

Cleave: "Kwanda-kwanda-KORRR!"

Combat Reflexes: "Greev-shak-*ha*!"

Deflect Arrows: "Kworfo!" (followed by a glottal chortle)

Dodge: (annoyed, self-reproaching growl)

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "Kwurf!"

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "Kwurf-*kalf*!"

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Kwurf-urk-*raaaa*!"

Great Cleave: "Kwanda-*kwanda*-korr-RUUGHF!"

Improved Bull Rush: "Hurkunhackar!"

Improved Critical: "Greghk! Hakka-Greghk!"

Power Attack: "Ha-ROOOONNNN!"

Rapid Shot: "Ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-*eeeeeeee*!"

Spring Attack: "Gwa-HURDY!"

Stunning Fist: "Thurn thurn kdwaghk!"

Whirlwind Attack: "Fagh-fvwhershshshsh!"

Dwarven

This theme is based on the traditional honor that dwarves pay to family and ancestors. Dwarven characters are best suited for this theme, since others might have difficulty remembering all the names or ascribing the proper respect to them.

Background: Forged in the volcanic halls of the dwarven homeland and honed over millennia, the dwarven arts of combat draw on hoary tradition. Each combat action is named to honor a great hero who spilled his blood in ancient times to assure the continuance of the dwarven race. Whenever you use these maneuvers in combat, you not only pay homage to a great hero, but you also strike for vengeance in his name, making today's enemies pay for the terrible depredations of the past. These battlecries also serve to bolster your fighting spirit—uttering them reminds you why you are angry and steels your resolve to keep fighting, no matter what the cost.

The reverence with which you shout these ancient heroes' names might evoke sniggering laughter from those who do not understand the pain and fire of the dwarven soul, but that matters not. If their mockery grows too blasphemous, you can always raise your blood-christened warhammer and provide a firsthand demonstration of the power that still resonates in those ancient names.

Flourishes: Dwarven commemorative battlecries are typically structured with an "X's-Y-Z" pattern, where X is a proper name, Y is an adjective alluding to a great event in the ancient chronicles, and Z is a noun that might or might not directly describe the maneuver at hand. Dwarven flourishes are oddly fatalistic, and they often seem to allude to a hero's last moments.

Standard Attack: None of the dwarven heroes listed in the ancient texts ever struck an ordinary blow. Thus, one should not sully their names by uttering them in such an unworthy context.

Fighting Defensively: "Bastar's bloodied brow!"

Total Defense: "Fredek's final breath!"

Cleave: "Adrik's orc-slayer!"

Combat Reflexes: "Lodin's last laugh!"

Deflect Arrows: "Porgumund's penultimate parry!"

Dodge: "Nershaur's necessary shame!"

Great Cleave: "Adrik's giant-slayer!"

Improved Bull Rush: "Charge of transpierced Parangdor!"

Improved Critical: "Eregarn's eye-gouger!"

Power Attack: "Ultathorn's ultimate vengeance!"

Rapid Shot: "Burning Baradur's flurry!"

Spring Attack: "Lamed Ljotolf's leap!"

Stunning Fist: "Ruined Rotlaf's raid!"

Whirlwind Attack: "Skapti's storming stand!"

Elven

The basis for this theme is the legendary elven love of nature. Though it is most appropriate for characters with elven blood, any character whose ideals are tied to nature might make use of the elven theme.

Background: Elven warriors taught you the subtle secrets of the discipline they call *halantrad,* or battlecraft. The philosophy behind *halantrad* draws heavily on the fundamental cycles of nature, from its slowly turning seasons to the inevitable cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Thus, its tutors often use metaphors involving nature not only to describe each move, but also to demonstrate its role in the great mystical oneness that animates all things.

Even as you slay an orc, demon, or other disciple of destruction and madness, you know that you and your opponent are inexorably bound to one another, just as a creature is bound to its reflected image in a limpid pond. While sending enemies to their deaths, you meditate profoundly on the sanctity of life.

Flourishes: Use as many images of the natural world as possible in your flourishes. For the purpose of this theme, sounding poetic is more important than using phrases that actually mean anything. Describe acts of violence as if they were extremely gentle. Flourishes for deadly maneuvers should be reverently whispered, not boldly shouted. The flourishes associated with this style are not taunts; they are prayers to the gods and spirits of the natural world.

Standard Attack: "Falling of the sharp-edged leaf!"

Fighting Defensively: "The elusiveness of pattering rain!"

Total Defense: "Into winter's shell retreat!"

Cleave: "By sudden eternity pierced!"

Combat Reflexes: "Predator made prey!"

Deflect Arrows: "By mist gently cloaked!"

Dodge: "As the wind carries fog!"

THE FLOURISHES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS STYLE ARE NOT TAUNTS; THEY ARE PRAYERS TO THE GODS AND SPIRITS OF THE NATURAL WORLD.

Expertise: Varies, as below.

-1 on attack rolls, +1 to AC: "Backward runs the stream!"

-3 on attack rolls, +3 to AC: "The current stands reversed!"

-5 on attack rolls, +5 to AC: "Upward runs the falls!"

Great Cleave: "Mortality's aching kiss!"

Improved Bull Rush: "Earth's enveloping cascade!"

Improved Critical: "Time's insinuating lyre!"

Power Attack: "Unleashed by nature's fury!"

Rapid Shot: "Storm of mournful hail!"

Spring Attack: "By ocean droplets sprayed!"

Stunning Fist: "Forced harmony!"

Whirlwind Attack: "Gray sky scything!"

One of the best way to find effective flourishes is to simply record some of the funny or interesting things your character says. If the other players respond well to a battle cry, take note and use it again. D

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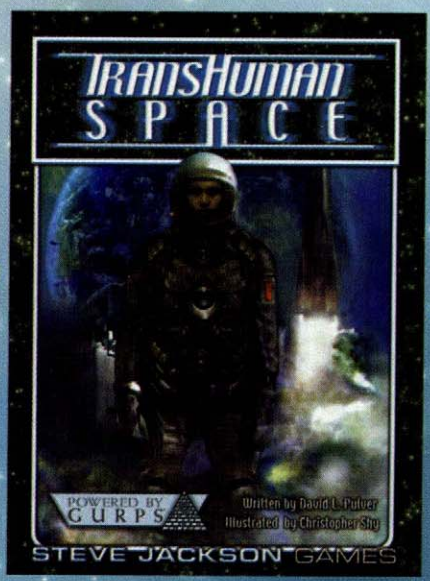

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Deep in his cavern, the snake god slumbers. With your blood he shall revive. From his milky skin he shall wriggle free, and in the night, your world he'll shrive.

—verse found scrawled on the outer walls of the impregnable city of Fachu-Moro, before its sudden and catastrophic collapse

VENOM AND COIL

by Robin Laws · illustrated by David McClellan

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE YUAN-TI

With gravel shifting beneath his steel-shod boots, the warrior follows the woman down a spiraling slope into the cave mouth's gloomy depths. There are things he has forgotten—he knows that much. For one thing, he is no longer sure of his name. Hilderic? Halderak? Something like that, perhaps. He watches the woman, her immodest silk robe tightening across her hard, lithe muscles, and no longer cares about such trifling details. Other nagging thoughts are dispelled too: Vaguely, he recalls a wife, and an oath to serve his lord. He was once something called a paladin, he thinks. But that was long ago, in another life. Now he is hers, and that is all that matters. He thinks of her lips, crimson with rouge powder, and the way they parted when she last gazed into his eyes.

He slips; his heel turns. Dimly, he is aware of the pain, but he trudges on nonetheless.

After perhaps miles of winding, twisting tunnels, of damp and loamy smells, of steadily dying illumination, light floods his eyes. It is offensive to him now—blinding, in fact. He wants only the darkness.

He stands in a torchlit temple, its rough limestone ceiling looming 20 feet above his head. Beside him, he hears the hissing screams of men, and he turns to see a half-dozen humans like himself, chained and leashed, their bare skin covered only with dirt and dried blood. Immediately, he knows they have been altered. He sees their scales, their darting tongues, the undulating serpents that rise from the back of the biggest captive, and he yearns for the pleasure this forbidden metamorphosis would surely bring him.

He follows the leashed slaves' eyes to the massive altar before him. It is carved from stone and bears the serpentine letters of a primordial language that, somehow, he understands. Its blood-spattered characters form an invocation to Merrshaulk, He Who Sleeps With Waking Eyes.

His vacant gaze falls on the massive form of the high priest, whose oversized and jowly human head is planted atop the glistening, coiled body of a black-scaled snake. Thin threads of beady saliva escape from the priest's mammoth jaws as he begins the chant of sacrifice. The droplets fall on the ex-paladin's face like cooling rain.

The woman—she who is not a woman at all, but something hatched from a thin-shelled egg—touches the man's face with delicate, claw-tipped fingers. He turns to her and sees a hard, semi-transparent membrane flick over her slitted emerald eyes. Grateful for this last glance at her, he kneels beneath the blade of her scimitar, waiting for the ecstasy of the death blow, knowing that the obliteration of his soul will bring closer the day of the Snake God's glorious return.

HERALDS OF THE REAWAKENING

Their gruesome crimes horrify the common man. They hiss poisoned ideas into the ears of kings and blow intoxicating smoke into the lungs of heroes. Whether they take human or ophidian form, the cruel, calculating creatures known as yuan-ti pursue a single goal: the return to consciousness of their gigantic, serpentine deity, Merrshaulk.

When that day comes, he will shake loose the constrictions of his dead, confining skin and writhe free, clad in new and dazzling scales, to devour the world and feast on its denizens. Then the yuan-ti will finally realize their destinies, as natural rulers of all that walks, flies, swims, or slithers. Until that time, they scheme and wait, protecting their lairs with ingenious traps, well-planned defensive maneuvers, and the mind-warping gifts of their dormant god.

THE SLEEPING GOD WEARS MANY SKINS

In a yuan-ti community, morphology determines destiny. The snake people come in three body types, and their physical forms dictate their places in society, their daily activities, and even their general temperament.

Pureblood

These yuan-ti look essentially human, although they possess subtly disturbing features that, on close inspection, give away their serpentine heritage. Purebloods are the ambassadors, builders, artisans, and spies of a yuan-ti nest. It is they who venture up to the world of men in the eternal quest for slaves and sacrifices.

THE NAME OF THE GOD

Astute readers may note that the name Merrshaulk doesn't seem to derive from the same tongue as the other yuan-ti words mentioned in this article. The first scholars to record anything about the yuan-ti were dwarves, and it is likely that Merrshaulk is actually a dwarven rendering of the deity's name. Although it is nearly impossible to convey proper yuan-ti pronunciation using our alphabet, a closer approximation of the correct version would be "Mi-Shao-Shur." Yuan-ti purebloods are careful to avoid using their native pronunciation in the presence of people who don't know what they are. For the sake of convenience, this article uses the spelling common among human and dwarven scholars.

From their pureblood elders, these yuan-ti learn to navigate their way through the manners and customs of the surface lands, so that they can pass as humans, elves, or half-orcs. (Only a few freakish individuals are equipped with body types that allow them to pose as gnomes, dwarves, or halflings.) The most experienced impostors might take on, in a superficial way, the viewpoints and traits of the beings they typically imitate. For example, a pureblood trained to slither through human society might seem curious, impetuous, confident, and resourceful. An expert on elves might tend toward a long-term, philosophical view of the sacred mission to awaken the Snake God. A pureblood who identifies with half-orcs might boast a quick temper and a preference for quick and decisive action, as well as a mighty appetite for food, drink, and rowdy entertainment.

WHEN THAT DAY COMES, HE WILL SHAKE LOOSE HIS DEAD SKIN TO DEVOUR THE WORLD AND FEAST ON ITS DENIZENS.

Halfblood

Halfblood yuan-ti add various serpentine features—from snakelike heads to coiled, legless bodies—to a basic humanoid frame. They are the guardians, warriors, and enforcers of the yuan-ti world. Halfbloods rarely travel far from their nest; in fact, they do so only when their leaders decide that the nest's security depends on a pre-emptive attack. Thus, these yuan-ti tend to look on the outside world with a mixture of fear, contempt, and hatred.

Although halfbloods don't bother to develop the charming and seductive qualities that allow their pureblood kin to operate on the surface, they're still brilliant thinkers. Most of them devote their burning intelligence to military matters, becoming quick-thinking combatants, expert long-term tacticians, or both.

Abomination

These yuan-ti are considered inherently holy because their physical forms most closely resemble that of Merrshaulk himself. Abominations are the mystics, philosophers, generals, judges, and leaders of a yuan-ti nest. Half of these creatures are gigantic snakes, and one-quarter of them are snakes with human-shaped arms. But the holiest of them all are the Shan-Pachan, the human-headed snakes that make up the last quarter of the abomination population. Members of this select group always serve as the high priests in a yuan-ti community, and the most senior Shan-Pachan priest in a nest doubles as its ruler.

Abominations are as eager as halfbloods are to avoid direct involvement with surface-dwellers, but since they require extensive knowledge of another civilization to plot its downfall effectively, they are intensely interested in the surface world. To this end, each abomination cultivates close ties with particular purebloods, extracting complete details of each and every adventure the latter have upon the surface. Blessed with both vivid visual imaginations and powerful memories, abominations are capable of correctly imagining, down to the placement of the last house, entire surface towns and cities, as described to them by generations of pureblood protégés.

PCs who make an enemy of an abomination might be distressed to discover that the creature knows the rooftops, dark alleys, and escape routes of their own neighborhoods better than they do. Adventurers dwelling in old castles or manors should take care that their yuan-ti foes don't use the back entrances and secret passageways built into such structures to sneak in at night and take revenge. It is entirely possible that the PCs' abomination enemies have committed to memory the complete floor plan of the entire compound where the characters are living.

HISSY FITS

Rivalries exist between the three castes, but the yuan-ti are too aware of the advantages of cooperation, and too fearful of Merrshaulk's wrath, to let minor hostilities slip out of control. However, the divine edicts of Merrshaulk encourage competition within each caste, ensuring that the

most qualified leaders come to the fore. The tensions fostered by this sense of perpetual rivalry can instantly turn polite repartee into blood-spewing battle.

Pureblood Rivalries

A pureblood who offends her partners during a mission—or worse yet, fails to perform her assigned duties—might be set upon and murdered before the group returns to the nest.

Halfblood Rivalries

It is perfectly acceptable for a halfblood to slay a superior and take his place; the snake people believe that an officer who fails to anticipate attacks from his underlings doesn't deserve to occupy his post. But an ambitious halfblood, knowing that he faces a rival at least as brilliant as himself, is unlikely to strike unless he can be assured of immediate and decisive victory. Since opportunities for one super-genius to destroy another don't arise too often, battles between halfbloods are as rare as they are short and shocking.

Abomination Rivalries

Fully snakelike abominations (known as Ma-Yin) or those with humanlike arms (Ma-Zhi) rarely fight with one another. Since they can never advance to the rank of high priest, the potential reward is rarely worth the risk. However, as soon as a ranking Shan-Pachan falters, his underlings quickly strike to destroy him. Often a community loses several Shan-Pachan during a war of succession: If the original pretender is wounded in his coup attempt, one or more colleagues move to finish him as well. Members of the other castes generally try to avoid involvement in such power struggles but, especially in the case of purebloods with abomination mentors, neutrality might not always be possible. Wars of succession always cost the community a certain number of lackeys and minions as well.

SERPENTINE SCHEMES AND POISONOUS PLOTS

Although the serpent people perform their share of human sacrifices on their dread god's bloody altar, their depredations go far beyond such trifles. They scheme elaborately in the surface world to bring about destruction and corruption at all levels. From a petty campaign to harass a tiny village to a plot to subvert an entire nation, no scheme is too big or too small to escape the attention of the serpent people. Some of their crimes are blatantly ghastly; others are so subtly corrosive that the hand of a yuan-ti might never be seen in them.

According to the sibilant liturgies of the Shan-Pachan, every act of gratuitous cruelty or destruction committed in Merrshaulk's name brings the deity closer to awakening. The cleverer and more perfectly executed the scheme, the more power it grants to the sleeping god. The greater the number of intelligent beings hurt, traumatized, or outraged by a scheme, the better.

Only gratuitous evil suits Merrshaulk's cosmic scheme. If a particular gruesome act brings tangible benefits to the yuan-ti, it can't also be dedicated to the god's awakening. For example, the lives taken by halfbloods successfully defending their nest from invading adventurers don't carry any religious significance, no matter how cruelly such enemies were slain. But the lives of any prisoners taken in the same action might then be expended in sacrifice, since the yuan-ti don't gain anything by slaying the survivors. Taking pleasure in torture and sadism during a sacrifice does not reduce its power to bring the Snake God nearer to consciousness.

Merrshaulk's scaly minions might be trying to execute any or all of the following conspiracies in a campaign near you. You can use any of the following adventure synopses to build the yuan-ti into your campaign.

Strings of Strange Killings

The yuan-ti horrify an entire community by murdering its most beautiful young maidens, one by one. The killings all share a common element, such as a scrawled threat left on the scene, or the same manner of death. The murders continue even as the community's guardians increase their vigilance; the more helpless the defenders seem, the more power the killings gain for Merrshaulk. Purebloods use all of their magic, genius, and detailed knowledge of local geography to penetrate locked rooms, sniff out hiding places, and slaughter their victims.

Sacrilege

In the deepest vaults of the old monastery overlooking the city lie ancient relics of the gods, so sacred that only the mightiest clerics may gaze upon them. A cadre of holy warriors, who lead a cloistered existence within the monastery, guard the vault night and day. Yet it is the very impregnability of the vault, and the supposed incorruptibility of the warrior monks, that makes the relics an irresistible target to the yuan-ti—the more unthinkable the crime, the more they yearn to commit it. The yuan-ti won't just steal the relics; they'll leave them shattered and profaned on the steps of the city's temples.

For decades, generations of purebloods have infiltrated the guilds that supply and maintain the monastery, and the snake people

CALCULATING TOWARD CHAOS

At first glance, it might seem odd to categorize the yuan-ti's particular brand of evil as chaotic rather than lawful. After all, the creatures organize themselves into a rigid caste structure and scheme in unison toward a single, overarching goal. But a devotion to chaos does not require a creature or society to behave with reckless self-destruction; it is possible to be blindingly intelligent and chaotic at the same time. While the methods the yuan-ti employ to protect themselves and to bring their cosmic scheme to fruition might be exacting, cautious, and incremental, their ultimate goal is one of destruction, frenzy, and bloodlust.

Although they imagine themselves dominating a future world remade by Merrshaulk, even their own myths imply that there will be very little left to rule by the time the Snake God is finished. Yuan-ti do not act as they do because they believe, in some dusty, abstract way, in the importance of their goals. Rather, they trick, undermine, seduce, enslave, torture, and kill because these acts give them sublime and visceral pleasure. Merrshaulk created children who would shiver in rapturous transport as they brought him souls to eat and prepared the way for his inevitable, triumphant return to the Material Plane.

Yuan-ti feel no special obligation to further the general cause of either chaos or evil. When the time comes, they'll be just as happy for Merrshaulk to devour societies devoted to other evil gods as they will to watch him smash citadels of justice and light. When they ally with other evil creatures, they do so for their own benefit, no matter how they present themselves to potential dupes. In fact, yuan-ti are gifted enough mentally that they can often manipulate simple-minded evil humanoids without ever revealing themselves.

have never ceased working to corrupt the city's high-ranking clerics. Now that they are coiled to strike, their plan requires one last element: a group of traveling adventurers to take the blame while the schemers slither back to their holes.

Death of an Empire

For centuries, a great humanoid empire has thrived and grown. Its senate, elected by the people, has ruled wisely and well. The vigilant senators have never allowed the government's leaders to make themselves into kings or emperors. Yet now the outer provinces of the empire are beset by barbarian enemies, and the people, spoiled by decades of prosperity, fear the ravages of war. A great general has arisen to combat the barbarian hordes, but he clearly lusts for absolute power and the title of emperor.

The yuan-ti have carefully orchestrated this situation. Their forked tongues hiss into the ears of barbarian chieftains, cowardly senators, and the great general himself. Unless someone uncovers and reveals their plot, the general will take control of the empire, dooming it to centuries of tyranny and corruption, followed by eventual collapse. Worse still, because the scope of the yuan-ti's plot is vast enough to change the course of history itself, the civilization's eventual ruin will bring Merrshaulk to the very brink of waking.

CYCLES OF LIFE: THE SNAKE EATS ITS TAIL

Yuan-ti are "born" in the natural way, by hatching from eggs. A healthy adult female, regardless of caste, lays a clutch of 1d4+2 eggs once every three months as an involuntary bodily function. Except in extreme circumstances (for example, when a nest must suddenly compensate for catastrophic population loss), the majority of the eggs are left unfertilized.

Unfertilized eggs provide rich sustenance but are regarded with intense reverence, as gifts from Merrshaulk. They are typically fed to the high priest and his inner circle of abominations in the course of ceremonial worship. Except for this usage, the yuan-ti treat the consumption of eggs as a perverse and shocking crime. In the event of a severe food shortage, the priest might grant others the right to eat eggs as well, but most yuan-ti would find such a diet too awful to even contemplate. Outsiders who eat yuan-ti eggs are mercilessly hunted down and subjected to horrible vengeance, and even worse fates await the hapless halfblood guardians who allowed such enemies to get past them into the egg chamber.

The fertilization process is carefully controlled by the priests, who match male and female with careful calculation to breed the smartest, fastest, and strongest possible specimens. The priests also use these selective breeding techniques to enforce the desired population ratios among the castes.

The caste of a hatchling is completely predictable, depending on the combination of parents. A pureblood mother and father produce a pureblood child. A halfblood can be produced from two halfblood parents, or from a pureblood and an abomination. Abominations can be produced only from the mating of two abominations.

The exact mixture of features for halfbloods and abominations is unpredictable—an expression of the race's chaotic nature. The abominations wait with bated breath for the hatching of their own, praying fervently to Merrshaulk that they'll be blessed with enough human-headed monsters to continue the priesthood. As evil as they are, the yuan-ti do not practice infanticide or otherwise adjust the odds by exiling unwanted young snakeheads, primarily because of their extreme reverence for reptile life (see the Veneration of Reptiles sidebar). Sometimes no new priests are hatched at all; such an event is seen as a sign of Merrshaulk's disfavor because it dooms a nest to extinction. A community that has gone for many years without a priestly hatching becomes especially vicious and desperate in its schemes against the outside world, hoping to regain divine grace.

Yuan-ti children are raised communally. The fertilization of an egg creates no special bond between mother and father or between parent and child.

Childhood

Yuan-ti advance rapidly from hatchlings to adults. Over a four-year period, a young pureblood matures, sheding its skin five or six times. Halfbloods reach full physical maturity in six years; abominations in eight. A halfblood might molt eight to ten times; an abomination, ten to twelve. For 3d4 days after a molt, the young yuan-ti remains sluggish and vulnerable. (Treat this condition as though the creature had gained a negative level.) On rare occasions, an adult yuan-ti might undergo an unnatural growth spurt and molt once more. For example, an abomination priest might increase in size after arranging a sacrifice that Merrshaulk finds especially pleasing.

The mental development of young yuan-ti outstrips even their speedy physical maturation. By their first birthdays, they have already mastered language, logic, and the basic precepts of engineering and military strategy. Although an occasional precocious individual might trouble the community by heading rashly off in search of danger

BY THEIR FIRST BIRTHDAYS, THEY HAVE ALREADY MASTERED LANGUAGE, LOGIC, AND THE BASICS OF MILITARY STRATEGY.

VENERATION OF REPTILES

Although yuan-ti view all mammals, even sentient ones, as innately inferior creatures, they pay great homage to their fellow reptiles. Their religion forbids them from slaying reptiles, and eating such creatures is a terrible taboo. Although many ordinary snakes eat their own kind, the yuan-ti regard cannibalism with a violent dread. They go to great lengths to track down, torture, and ritualistically slay any of their number who turn outlaw and deliberately bring harm to reptiles. However, their religious code does not require them to sacrifice themselves to protect other reptiles. Thus, it is not possible to bargain with a yuan-ti by threatening to slit the throat of a turtle you're holding.

and glory, immature yuan-ti are, on the whole, quiet, observant, and as calculatingly unemotional as the adults.

Unsentimental creatures, the yuan-ti hold no ceremonies to mark an individual's transition from adolescence to adulthood. A pureblood proves herself by venturing into the world; a halfblood or abomination might receive cold-blooded praise the first time she kills an invading adventurer.

YUAN-TI SOCIETY

The caste system of the yuan-ti imposes a reasonably strict social order. No individual may perform functions outside his caste, though each caste has a wide range of functionality for its members to choose from.

Gender Roles

The balance of power in yuan-ti society slightly favors males. Merrshaulk is always described as masculine, and his priests are exclusively male. Most teams of halfblood guardians are also led by males. However, the serpent people are too clever to suppress the talents of their females. Many yuan-ti conspiracies are conceived and overseen by women. In particular, female purebloods tend to be very successful in carrying out plots in the outside world.

Slavery

Deeming petty labor to be a function best performed by their inferiors, the yuan-ti keep slaves to do their dirty work. Some lairs located far from civilization capture unwilling tribesmen or humanoids for slaves, keeping them cowed by beatings and the threat of violence. Most, though, use their nefarious white resin (see the white resin sidebar) to create humanoid addicts whose need for the foul substance is so intense that they're willing to while away their final days in servitude to the serpent people. Though resin slaves are blank-eyed and indolent after they've had a taste of their poison, they work with feverish zeal when they are hungry for it. Generally sickly, such slaves usually survive for only a few years before dying of exhaustion. However, they're easy to replace, and they aren't as prone to rebellion, sudden violence, or escape as most ordinary slaves are.

Resin slaves do sometimes create one curious inconvenience: Long-term users of the substance sometimes spontaneously develop reptilian features, such as extra serpentine limbs, a forked tongue, or even fangs. Some serpent priests speculate that such slaves are just imperfectly manifesting the hidden reptile heritage common to all humanoids. The bearers of such features almost invariably go insane, degenerating rapidly until they are capable of no activity more complex than gibbering and frothing at the mouth. Of course, the yuan-ti reverence for reptile life demands that they feed and care for these disturbing specimens until the natural expiration of their lives. For this reason, yuan-ti communities take care to keep their populations of resin slaves low, lest their members be forced to support a large number of unproductive, half-reptilian ex-servitors.

Adventurers are sometimes called upon to rescue slaves from yuan-ti lairs, in the hopes that they can be rehabilitated before they die or start growing cobras from their spines.

The Forgotten

Many eons ago, Merrshaulk and a cabal of evil sorcerers performed a host of fiendish experiments that eventually culminated in the creation of the yuan-ti race. Not all of their attempts were successful, and it is thought that some of the creatures produced by the failed experiments survived to mate with

WHITE RESIN

In ancient times, when Merrshaulk was awake, he taught his first minions how to make various magical powders designed to protect his people and further his schemes. The descendants of these first yuan-ti zealously guard the recipes for Merrshaulk's preparations. Many a brave (and reckless) alchemist has died in pursuit of these secrets. Although not all of these drugs, poisons, and chemicals come in liquid form, they are all manufactured as though they were potions. Although there are many such drugs and chemicals made by the yuan-ti, the most notorious and insidious of their tools is an addictive substance called white resin.

White resin is a gummy substance made from certain rare herbs mixed with yuan-ti venom. The drug can be ingested (usually dissolved in an alcoholic beverage) or inhaled (by smoking in a pipe). (See the *Book of Vile Darkness* or *Lords of Darkness* for more information on drugs and their effects.)

The yuan-ti use white resin primarily to gain leverage over targeted individuals and make them accomplices in their sinister plans. Sometimes, when the snake people need large quantities of gold to bring their schemes to fruition, they operate extensive black market operations to sell white resin, simply as a means of earning coin. Now and then, the yuan-ti foster rampant addiction for ritual purposes, dedicating the evil energies so created to the raising of their god.

On a few occasions, their addiction programs have backfired on them. In one notable case, an addicted barbarian king captured a nest of yuan-ti and enslaved its members, guaranteeing himself a stable supply.

Yuan-ti sometimes gain new addicts by administering white resin without their victims' knowledge. Most commonly, they accomplish this goal by mixing dried and powdered resin with rouge powder, applying it to their own lips, and kissing their victims into a state of dangerous intoxication. A creature drugged with white resin against its will may attempt one Fortitude save (DC 18) to resist the initial effect and another 1 minute later at the same DC to resist the secondary effect. A creature that willingly takes the drug automatically fails both saving throws. The serpent people are immune to all effects of white resin, pleasurable or otherwise.

Initial Effect: The user feels intense but unwholesome physical pleasure. The duration of this sensation is 1d6 × 10 minutes for a first-time user, or 1d6 × 5 minutes for anyone who has used the drug on one to ten prior occasions, or 1d6 minutes for a user who has taken white resin more than ten times. During this period, the user is stunned and helpless, savoring the sickly joy coursing through his body.

Secondary Effect: 1d4 points of Wisdom damage.

Side Effects: White resin can cause a user to spontaneously develop reptilian physical features. Every six months that the user remains addicted, he must make a Fortitude save (DC 1 + the number of previous such saves). Success leaves the user unchanged; failure means the user has acquired some reptilian feature, such as a forked tongue, fangs, extra serpentine limbs (usually sprouting from the back, legs, or arms), or the like. (The DM chooses the exact effect.) As soon as such a feature appears, the user must make a successful Will save (DC 15 + 2/year of addiction) or take 2d8 points of Intelligence drain (to a minimum of 1). Regardless of the result, the user must make a new Will save against the same effect at the same DC once per week until his or her Intelligence score reaches 1.

Overdose: A user who takes more than one dose in a 24-hour period gains one negative level (Fortitude DC 18 to remove).

Alchemy DC: 20; **Addiction:** High; **Market Price:** 100 gp; **Note:** Sale of this substance is an evil act and is illegal where civilized authorities are aware of its existence.

humans. This fact might explain why, as preposterous as it sounds, a few humans have traces of reptile blood coursing through their veins.

Within yuan-ti society, such humans are known as the Forgotten, or Yin-Shu. (Due to interbreeding, half-orcs and half-elves can also belong to this group.) The Forgotten are pitied as lost family members who have been deprived of the glorious truth of evil and pathetically separated from Merrshaulk's cool embrace. To awaken them to their reptile natures is an act of high religious devotion. Some priests even go so far as to say that all the Yin-Shu must be returned to the nest before their god can emerge from his hibernation.

Purebloods can instinctively sense the presence of a Yin-Shu from as far away as 100 feet. Once a nest becomes aware that such a creature is nearby, its members modify or even suspend their current schemes to bring the foundling back into the fold.

Because the required conversion is more likely to be successful with a willing participant, yuan-ti usually try to win over a newfound Yin-Shu. It's difficult, to say the least, to convince a human that she is really a snake person and must surrender to an inhuman heritage, so the purebloods typically mount a slow campaign of persuasion. Often they assign a pureblood of the opposite sex to court the Yin-Shu as a lover. Sometimes the subject even marries her yuan-ti partner before realizing that the latter's goal involves recruitment into another species.

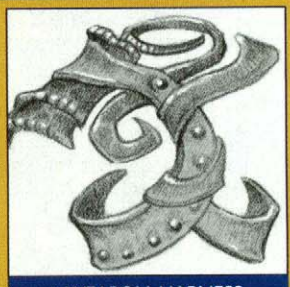
Because of their hidden heritage, many Forgotten feel an unexplained sense of distance from the rest of society. They have trouble forming bonds with others and might perceive themselves as cursed or doomed. Many are plagued by disturbing dreams in which they devolve to half-serpentine forms and writhe in burrows with fellow snakes. Scenes of bloodied altars and dread rituals also haunt their nightmares. When a pureblood arrives to reveal the truth behind their most secret fears, some Yin-Shu feel such a sense of relief and understanding that they willingly embrace their reptile natures. Most, though, recoil in horror and do all they can to deny that their worst nightmares are coming true.

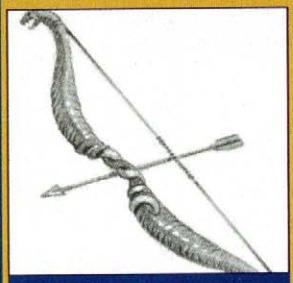
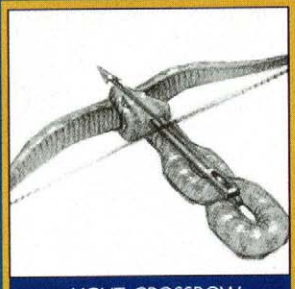
Yin-Shu who are already selfish or evil usually fall all over themselves in the rush to shed their old skins and gain sinister new powers. Oddly, though, evil Yin-Shu are in the minority. Good-aligned ones, who must be corrupted before they can embrace their new lives, are much more common. Yin-Shu who resist a nest's invitation are eventually kidnapped and carried off regardless of their wishes.

Cooperative or not, a Yin-Shu who is taken to the nest suffers a painful process of conversion, during which she

THE DESIGNS OF YUAN-TI NESTS MAKE THEM DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, FOR HUMANOID CREATURES TO NAVIGATE.

WEAPONS OF DECEIT

ARMOR	INTENDED USE	ALTERNATE USE
BREASPLATE AND HELMET	This helmet and breastplate shows the yuan-ti obsession with snakes only on the helmet.	The picture to the left could depict the leather armor that yuan-ti pureblood rogues wear on their surface forays.
 WEAPON HARNESS	An abstract representation of entwined snakes, this weapon harness might be worn by yuan-ti without arousing suspicion.	This item could be a device useful for capturing foes for sacrifice. It might work like *iron bands of Bilarro.*

WEAPONS	INTENDED USE	ALTERNATE USE
 LONGBOW	Yuan-ti often use poisoned arrows, and yuan-ti longbows can be fitted with poison reservoirs in snake-headed notches.	The picture to the left could also represent a short bow or a composite short bow or longbow.
 LIGHT CROSSBOW	This crossbow's distinctive design belies its creator's heritage and could be the first clue that the PCs face yuan-ti.	A magical version of this crossbow might fire crossbow bolts that turn into vipers while in flight.

is subjected to various prolonged magical rituals and forced to drink a succession of foul potions. Many of these draughts are laced with yuan-ti venom, and it is not unheard-of for a Yin-Shu to die during conversion.

For those who survive, the conversion takes six to eight weeks to complete. Some Yin-Shu transform into halfbloods at this point; others become purebloods. The latter maintain their original appearances, but anyone who knew such a character well before conversion can sense a subtle change in her attitude afterward. To randomly determine the result of a conversion, the character must make a Fortitude save (DC 20). Success indicates a pureblood; failure, a halfblood.

A former Yin-Shu who held a useful position in society is encouraged to lead a double life. The abominations often devise new conspiracies that make clever use of converted Yin-Shu and their roles in a human community.

THE NEST

Most yuan-ti nests lie far from civilized habitation. Although the snake people are skilled artificers, large-scale engineering projects are beyond them; they'd sooner alter existing underground complexes than build their own from scratch. Given a choice, they favor catacombs beneath old temples. Yuan-ti are equally happy to live under ancient temples of Merrshaulk from the days when he was openly worshipped on the surface or to profane the crumbling shrines of rival deities.

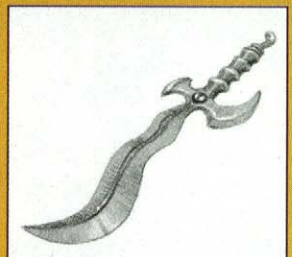
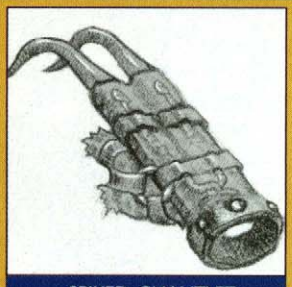
The snake people are also at home in natural cave networks. When relocating, halfblood generals and trapmakers look for places with soft, workable rock (such as limestone), in which they can install gates, traps, and other defenses.

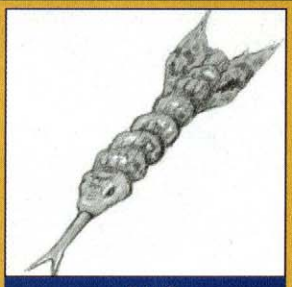
In exceptionally rare instances, yuan-ti occupy extensive tunnel networks under bustling humanoid cities. Such cities are always corrupt and decadent because their governing institutions have long ago been thoroughly penetrated by their secret, serpentine rulers. With their mania for safety, yuan-ti would never dream of living below a city inhabited by stalwart heroes, or anyone else who might try to destroy their nests.

Each access point to a yuan-ti nest is ringed by several perimeters of deadly traps. The snake people place traps not only in the tunnels that feed immediately into their lairs, but also in the surrounding countryside. Their inventive trapmakers use a wide variety of traps complex enough to bring sweat to the brow of even the most experienced rogue. They're particularly famous for building false triggers into their traps to mislead those who would disable them. Their traps also tend to be either alarmed (so that they alert defenders in the nest to tampering), or interconnected (so that the disabling of one trap sets the others off, or at least makes them harder to circumvent). Masters of camouflage, yuan-ti trapsmiths are highly skilled at concealing their handiwork among the natural features of the landscape.

The designs of yuan-ti nests make them difficult, if not impossible, for humanoids to navigate. Functional stairs are absent, though a few preexisting staircases (trapped, of course) might remain as decoys. The serpent people have no need for stairs; they simply slither from one level to the next on ropes, vines, columns, and ramps. (After all, even a pureblood can shapechange into a viper at will.)

Yuan-ti weapons and equpment function just like their counterparts from other culutures, but the reptilian trappings make their origin obvious. Using or selling plundered yuan-ti goods in a community that has been infiltrated by the snake people is sure to elicit a retributive attack from the yuan-ti and their minions.

WEAPONS	INTENDED USE	ALTERNATE USE
 SHORT SWORD	Only vaguely snake-like, PCs might need to take this weapon to a sage to identify its origins.	This weapon could also be a scimitar, cutlas or falchion.
 SPIKED GUANTLET	A spiked guantlet is an easily concealable weapon that is handy for delivering poisoned attacks.	This weapon could also be the bladed guantlet presented in *Sword and Fist*.

WEAPONS	INTENDED USE	ALTERNATE USE
HELMET	This ceremonial helmet is placed on Forgotten during the rituals that fully transform them into yuan-ti.	At the DM's discretion, wearing armor of obvious yuan-ti origin might be worth a +1 circumstance bonus to Intimidate checks.
 DART	Another easily concealable weapon, the dart is a favorite of yuan-ti spys who rely on poison to defeat their foes.	As a magic item, this dart could uncoil in flight, becoming a javelin or spear before striking the target.

FOR YOUR CHARACTER

Because of their relatively high adjustments to several statistics, powerful special abilities, and inherently evil natures, playing a yuan-ti character is trickier than playing any of the core races or even many other creatures in the *Monster Manual*. If you want to play a yuan-ti character, it's certainly possible, and playing a renegade yuan-ti could provide great roleplaying opportunities as the other players struggle to accept such a creature and other yuan-ti hunt the renegade.

Yuan-ti purebloods have 6 Hit Dice, a level adjustment of +5, and therefore have a starting equivalent character level (ECL) of 11. That means that a yuan-ti pureblood with no class levels is appropriate for adventuring with other 11th-level characters. Pureblood stat adjustments are as follows: Str—, Dex +2, Con—, Int +8, Wis +8, Cha +6.

Yuan-ti halfbloods have 7 Hit Dice, a level adjustment of +5, and therefore a starting ECL of 12. Halfblood stat adjustments are as follows: Str +4, Dex +2, Con +2, Int +8, Wis +8, Cha +6.

Yuan-ti abominations have 9 Hit Dice, a level adjustment of +7, and therefore a starting ECL of 16. Abomination stat adjustments are as follows: Str +8, Dex +2, Con +6, Int +8, Wis +8, Cha +6.

Important chambers are connected not by open, easily-navigable corridors, but by pipes, cramped tunnels, and crevices. When modifying an existing complex, the yuan-ti seal off indefensible passageways. Adventurers should never be able to penetrate to the temple at the heart of a yuan-ti nest by simply charging down hallways and busting down doors. Instead, they must make creative use of *teleport, polymorph self, passwall,* and other exotic means of entry. Naturally, the yuan-ti are well aware of all such spells and take them into account when formulating defense plans.

The yuan-ti are highly intelligent foes. As such, they never allow invaders to systematically travel through their lairs, methodically killing the inhabitants of each chamber as they come to it. Instead, they mass to defend their home and temple, coolly executing a well-planned group defense that makes full use of their chameleon and aversion powers (as described in the yuan-ti entry in the *Monster Manual*).

Because all yuan-ti can assume the form of a Tiny viper, they riddle the walls, floors, and ceilings of their nests with small tunnels so that they can hide, slither from room to room, and ambush intruders. Yuan-ti nests are always built with a few small chambers accessed only by these small tunnels, providing the yuan-ti with a refuge should the nest ever be invaded by foes too powerful for the yuan-ti to overcome. Although these cambers are obviously bereft of furniture and other large objects, yuan-ti often store a reserve of a few healing potions and other small magic items useful in desperate situations.

Yuan-ti live communally, with little regard for personal property. Privacy means nothing to them; only the highest priests bother with individual living quarters. The temple is usually the physical and social center of a nest. Other sections include large communal areas for living and sleeping, food storage, treasure vaults, workshops, armories, and slave pens.

Temporary Nests

While only determined, well-prepared adventurers can penetrate the deep interior of a genuine yuan-ti lair, the workaday hero could well stumble into what yuan-ti tacticians call a forward nest. The serpent people establish these temporary hideouts, often underground, in the towns and cities they seek to undermine. Although a forward nest is usually guarded by especially adventuresome halfblood warriors and well equipped with traps and defensive measures, it isn't nearly as formidable as a real nest. A forward nest might have stairs to accommodate the thralls and allies of the serpent people, and it doesn't give off the characteristic stench of a true lair. When breaking up a yuan-ti conspiracy, it is often enough to lay waste to the temporary nest, sending the surviving plotters slithering off into the night.

FEATS

Yuan-ti use their mind-dominating powers to advance their more subtle schemes in the civilized world. With the following feats, they can magnify these abilities even further. All of these feats fall into the Special category because they are restricted solely to yuan-ti.

Blessing of Merrshaulk [Special]

You were hatched from an egg mottled with a pattern resembling the Slumbering God himself. Because of this auspicious marking, you are especially adept with the innate magics that Merrshaulk has granted to his servitors.

Prerequisite: Human-headed yuan-ti.

Benefit: Add 1 to the number of times per day you may use each of your spell-like abilities, and 2 to the DC of any saving throws they allow.

Irresistible Embrace [Special]

With your genius for manipulation, you can easily circumvent the basic mental defenses that normally set the limits for mind control.

Prerequisite: Cha 15+.

Benefit: You gain a +4 bonus on all opposed Charisma checks.

Tightening Coils [Special]

Having once forced your superior will on the mind of another, you find it trivially easy to resume your grip on that creature's emotions and behavior.

Prerequisite: Cha 15+, Spell Focus (Enchantment)

Benefit: When you use any of your mind-affecting spells or spell-like abilities, the save DC increases by +2 if you have ever successfully used any such ability on that target before.

CONCLUSION

Wherever selfish people corrupt lofty ideals for their own glory or enrichment, wherever people throw their lives aside for momentary intoxication, wherever cruel and gruesome crimes are committed, the scaly hand of a yuan-ti is likely to be at work. A dedicated slayer of evil can find few foes cleverer, more secretive, or more effective than the serpent people—and few more deserving of an adventurer's swift and smiting blade. D

THROUGHOUT THE AGES
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THE PALE HORSE ON THE HORIZON
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HAS BEEN MISPLACED
PALE HORSES DON'T PACK
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MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL

by Jacqui Smith

There's something about mirrors—something magical, mysterious, and perhaps even a bit sinister. Catching a glimpse of one's reflection distorted by some shiny but uneven surface can be more than a little unsettling. It's easy to see why people who rarely saw their reflections might come to believe that a mirror was a tool of the devil—one that could steal their very souls! Indeed, in earlier times, people covered all the mirrors in the house after a death on the premises, believing that the ghost of the deceased could steal the soul of anyone who saw his reflection and drag it along to the netherworld. By the same sort of logic, a vampire, who had no soul, should also have no reflection in a mirror.

With such fanciful stories about plain, ordinary mirrors, what incredible powers might magic bestow on one? In the magical worlds of the D&D game, where myth and history merge, mirrors are obvious targets for magical enhancement. And indeed, folklore is full of magic mirrors, from the legend of Narcissus to the tales of Snow White and the Mirror of Galadriel.

MAKING A MIRROR

Before the advent of precision technology, mirrors were difficult and expensive to make, and quality tended to be poor. A mirror that returned a relatively undistorted reflection was extremely rare.

In ancient times, mirrors were made by hand-polishing pieces of metal until they shone. The first crude glass mirrors were made by covering glass with tinfoil, pouring on mercury, and applying pressure to produce a layer of mercury-tin amalgam. This method could produce only a fairly small mirror, and the reflection it gave had an unpleasant bluish or leaden hue, but such mirrors were still better than polished brass. Silvered glass mirrors, like the one in your bathroom, weren't invented until much later.

Thus it is reasonable to assume that any sizeable glass mirror (even a nonmagical one) found in a D&D world must have been manufactured with the aid of magic. A wizard could easily develop a magical method of creating plate glass and an equally arcane process for bonding a thin layer of silver to it. The *polymorph any object* spell would be perfect, if a powerful enough caster could be found. Alternatively, a wizard might research a spell to make a sheet of metal transparent and then back it with silver. Such a process would probably be expensive, but the resulting mirror would be virtually unbreakable—a major advantage considering the curse of ill luck that traditionally results from breaking mirrors.

The manufacture of mirrors is a much broader topic for arcane study than it might seem. Wizards who specialize in the development of spells involving mirrors or the construction of either mundane or magic mirrors are sometimes called mirror mages.

MAGIC MIRRORS

The arcane powers of magic mirrors take many forms, but they are often tied to the traditional or legendary uses of normal mirrors. Several such historical or mythical themes are discussed below, with examples of potential magical adaptations.

Reflection: The most obvious traditional use of a mirror is for reflection, so many powers of magic mirrors relate to this ability. For example, a magic mirror might be able to reflect things that cannot normally be reflected, such as spell effects. The abilities of a *ring of spell turning* would be quite appropriate for a mirror.

Scrying: Some say that a mirror can reveal scenes from other places if proper concentration is used. Indeed, self-proclaimed seers sometimes use mirrors instead of crystals or pools for scrying purposes. Thus, a magic scrying mirror might reveal hidden truths or reflect scenes from elsewhere on command. Replacing a wizard's *crystal ball* with a scrying mirror can be a subtle way of revealing

MIRROR,

information about her personality and background within the campaign world—perhaps she hails from a land where mirrors are commonly used as scrying devices.

Divination: The most common use of magic mirrors in antiquity was, not surprisingly, to divine the future—a practice known as catoptromancy. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras was said to read the future by holding a magic mirror up to the moon. At the temple of Ceres in Patras, a mirror was used to divine whether or not a sick person would recover. The mirror was placed under the surface of the water in a certain fountain, and the patient was situated so that his image was reflected through the water by the mirror. The reflection of a patient destined to recover would look fresh and healthy, while that of a person fated to die would appear pale and corpselike. This idea could be adopted wholesale for a campaign world—the player characters could find a similar magic pool in a temple of any deity concerned with health, healing, or divination. The prophetic use of magic mirrors can be somewhat problematical in the roleplaying context, but the DM could easily use an NPC catoptromancer to drop a hint or two to stymied players.

Portals: Many mythical mirrors have provided portals to other worlds. Often the destination world can be seen simply by gazing into the mirror's surface. But unlike a divination mirror, which simply displays another place or time, a portal mirror allows the viewer access to the alien place depicted. In a fantasy world, such portal mirrors are often created in pairs, so that the user can step into one mirror and out of the other.

Magic Mirrors as Treasure

If mirrors have a flaw as magic items, it is their fragility. Large mirrors are almost impossible to transport intact, so they are generally found close to where they were created—typically in the homes of high-level wizards. The ease of breakage creates a logistical challenge for adventurers attempting to carry one off. A second potential issue is that a magic mirror's functionality is sometimes impaired if it is removed from its original location. At the DM's discretion, a magic mirror might not function at all if moved, or it might have to be correctly set up at a new location before it will work again.

New Magic Mirrors

Below are some examples of magic mirrors, but many more are possible. Such items might be introduced in conjunction with the mirror spells above, or separately.

Carnival Mirror

The first *carnival mirror* was created by an embittered wizard as a means of vengeance against an unfaithful lover. Such mirrors are sometimes used to protect valuables, but they are more often found in the homes of practical jokers.

A *carnival mirror* measures 2 feet by 6 feet, not including its 1-foot-tall stand. Any corporeal creature looking into the mirror from less than 30 feet away sees the reflection of an animal or other creature that relates to some unpleasant facet of the gazer's own character (DM's choice). For example, a fighter who fancies himself a ladies' man might see himself reflected as a wolf. The gazer must then attempt a Fortitude save (DC 16) or be polymorphed as per *polymorph other* into the creature depicted in the mirror.

Caster Level: 7th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *detect thoughts, polymorph other;* **Market Price:** 56,100 gp; **Cost to Create:** 28,050 gp + 2,244 XP; **Weight:** 35 lb.

Makeup Mirror

Sometimes called the mirror of vanity, this item is popular among elderly matrons who wish to look young again—although few would advertise that fact. A *makeup mirror* measures 9 inches by 12 inches and comes in a dark wooden frame. A folding triangular support allows it to stand upright and yet collapse easily for storage in a drawer or a carrying case.

Once per day, the mirror can alter the appearance of anyone gazing into it. The gazer need only speak the command word while concentrating on the desired image. The alteration includes face, hairstyle, and hands, but not body, shape, or race. This grants the user of the mirror a +5 bonus to Disguise checks. This bonus does not stack with the bonuses to Disguise provided by *change self* and *alter self.* The change lasts for 2 hours.

Caster Level: 3rd; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *change self;* **Market Price:** 2,160 gp; **Cost to Create:** 1,080 gp + 86 XP; **Weight:** 3 lb. (without case).

Mirror of Answering

A *mirror of answering* resembles the sort of mirror a noble lady might have in her dressing room, but it has the power to answer questions with varying degrees of accuracy. Oval in shape, the mirror is housed in a

wooden frame with a built-in stand. The whole arrangement stands 33 inches high and measures 24 inches across. It weighs 15 pounds and is unusually bulky and difficult to transport.

Once per day, if set upright on its stand and faced directly by its petitioner, the mirror can answer one question put to it, relating only to the present. It might speak its answer, or display a vision related to the answer, or both, as the DM sees fit. The mirror answers correctly 80% of the time, but its answers are not necessarily clear or helpful to the petitioner.

Caster Level: 10th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *divination, magic mouth;* **Market Price:** 44,800 gp; **Cost to Create:** 22,400 gp + 1,792 XP; **Weight:** 15 lb.

Mirror of Auras

This polished obsidian hand mirror reflects images poorly, but it can aid in the identification of magic items by reflecting their auras.

When a magic item is placed before the mirror, a glowing nimbus of colored light appears on the mirror's surface around the murky image of the object itself. The intensity of this aura corresponds to the strength of the magic, as with the *detect magic* spell, and the color identifies the school of the strongest magic the item bears: green for Abjuration, orange for Conjuration, pearl white for Divination, magenta for Enchantment, red for Evocation, sunshine yellow for Illusion, indigo for Necromancy, and blue for Transmutation.

Caster Level: 3rd; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *detect magic;* **Market Price:** 2,500 gp; **Cost to Create:** 1,250 gp + 100 XP; **Weight:** 1 lb.

Mirror of Dreams

This rare item allows the user to view the dreams of another person. Legend has it that such a mirror was once used to scan the dreams of a wounded hero who would not wake from her sleep, so that others could find the key to her revival and the land's salvation. Such mirrors have also been used to aid in the recovery of stolen items, the location of missing persons, and the curing of insanity.

The *mirror of dreams* is a 15-inch-diameter circular mirror set within an ivory frame that is embellished with twelve segments of paua shell. If the command word is spoken when the mirror is within 10 feet and pointed at a sleeping creature, the glass turns cloudy. The sleeper's dreams may then be viewed in the mirror's hazy surface for up to 20 minutes.

Caster Level: 3rd; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *detect thoughts;* **Market Price:** 11,050 gp; **Cost to Create:** 5,525 gp + 442 XP; **Weight:** 10 lb.

Mirror of Lies

This mirror reveals liars by distorting their images in its surface. It is a favorite of spies and judges everywhere, but politicians and others who make their livings through prevarication despise it.

This oval mirror measures 3 inches by 2 inches and is set in a plain wooden frame that can easily be held in one hand. A character's image in a *mirror of lies* looks perfectly normal until she speaks an untruth. At that point, the reflection distorts, making the character's face warped and twisted. The distortion becomes more pronounced with each subsequent lie.

Caster Level: 7th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *discern lies;* **Market Price:** 56,100 gp; **Cost to Create:** 28,050 gp + 2,244 XP; **Weight:** —.

Mirror of Scrying

Some wizards actually find mirrors more convenient for scrying than crystal balls. (After all, mirrors take up less desk space, they don't get lost under piles of scrolls, and they have alternative uses in personal grooming.) A *mirror of scrying* is usually rectangular, measuring approximately 12 inches by 18 inches, but oval and even circular versions have been reported. It resembles a normal mirror in all ways and has the same functions as a *crystal ball*—it can be used at any time to see over virtually any distance or even into other planes of existence, as with the spell *scrying*. Such a mirror may also be created with any of the additional powers described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for a *crystal ball*, with a commensurate increase in market price.

Caster Level: 10th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *scrying* (plus any additional spells put into item); **Market Price:** 40,000 gp; **Cost to Create:** 20,000 gp + 1,600 XP; **Weight:** 10 lb.

Mirror of the Ages

The *mirror of the ages* is a favorite of historians and bards because of its ability to display the details of past events. This framed upright mirror measures 2 feet by 6 feet, not including its stand. The frame and stand are done in a classic, timeless style that could have been popular at any time in history.

When it is set up properly at the location of interest and the command word is spoken, a *mirror of the ages* displays the most recent important event (one whose outcome affected at least one hundred people) that occurred there in the past. The image has visual and auditory components and displays ongoing action as if it were the result of a *scrying* spell. Once the mirror has replayed the entire event (or the first 4 hours of an especially long event), the effect ends. If activated again in the same spot within the same month, the mirror shows the next most recent such event, or continues the previous one if it was too long to display in 4 hours. If nothing of importance ever occurred there, the mirror's surface shows only the swirling mists of time. A *mirror of the ages* is usable once per day.

Caster Level: 10th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *legend lore;* **Market Price:** 61,200 gp; **Cost to Create:** 30,600 gp + 2,448 XP; **Weight:** 35 lb.

Mirror of Translocation

Mirrors of translocation are paired wall mirrors that function as doorways between locations. Wizards often use these mirrors to provide instant escape routes or to access their secret treasure vaults.

Each mirror of the pair is at least 7 feet tall and 2 feet wide, approximately the size of a doorway, and done in a style to match its counterpart. A *mirror of translocation* reflects images normally, but any creature that touches its surface is instantly transported to the location of its counterpart. *Mirrors of translocation* can even provide cross-planar transport when the two paired mirrors are on different planes.

Caster Level: 17th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *gate;* **Market Price:** 153,200 gp; **Cost to Create:** 76,600 gp + 6,128 XP; **Weight:** 50 lb.

Mirror of Truth

The *mirror of truth* has the power to reflect creatures and objects as they really are, reveal that which is invisible, negate illusions, show alignments, and more. Such mirrors are most commonly found in the entryways of large temples, placed so that clerics can observe visitors as they pass.

This item most commonly appears as a 4-foot-by-7-foot wall mirror, though other sizes and shapes are possible. The mirror reflects the true form of any creature or object passing before it, as if the observer were under the divine version of a *true seeing* spell. A *mirror of truth* provides a clear image even in areas of darkness (normal or magical).

Caster Level: 9th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *true seeing* (divine version); **Market Price:** 90,200 gp; **Cost to Create:** 45,100 gp + 3,608 XP; **Weight:** 90 lb.

Salve of Mirrored Eyes

When gently rubbed into the eyes, this salve confers all the effects of a *mirror eyes* spell for a period of 3 minutes. The salve must be applied to both eyes to be effective. A pot of this unguent contains 1d4 doses.

Caster Level: 3rd; **Prerequisites:** Craft Wondrous Item, *mirror eyes;* **Market Price:** 300 gp per dose; **Cost to Create:** 150 gp + 12 XP per dose; **Weight:** —.

Shield of Gaze Reflection

This item is actually a highly polished shield, not a true mirror. Like the famous artifact that killed the Mother of All Medusas by turning her own gaze back on her, this shield protects the user from petrification.

The *shield of gaze reflection* is a masterwork small metal shield that grants the user a +2 bonus on saving throws against gaze attacks. Once per day, it may also be used to reflect a petrifying gaze attack, such as that of a medusa or basilisk, back on its source. If the source is vulnerable to its own gaze attack, it must make a Fortitude save at the same DC as the original attack or suffer the full effect. Occasionally, a *shield of gaze reflection* may also be enchanted to confer an armor bonus, with a commensurate increase in market price.

Caster Level: 5th; **Prerequisites:** Craft Magic Arms and Armor, *spell turning;* **Market Price:** 3,550 gp; **Cost to Create:** 1,775 gp + 142 XP; **Weight:** 6 lb.

THE SPELLBOOK OF MIRANDA, MISTRESS OF MIRRORS

Miranda was a reclusive wizard who disliked travel but learned much about the world by watching it through her collection of magic mirrors. Her spellbook is a hefty volume, measuring 18 inches tall, 12 inches wide, and more than 3 inches thick. The book has pages of beaten metal, and its basilisk-hide covers are embellished with hundreds of tiny mirrors.

Spellbook: 0 level—*dancing lights;* 1st level—*color spray, Nystal's magic aura, Nystal's undetectable aura, silent image, unseen servant;* 2nd level—*alter self, blur, hypnotic pattern, invisibility, minor image, mirror eyes*, mirror image, misdirection;* 3rd level—*durability*, major image, shrink item, transparency*;* 4th level—*hallucinatory terrain, phantasmal killer, polymorph other, rainbow pattern;* 5th level—*dream, false vision, nightmare, permanency, teleport.*

*New spell developed by Miranda in her long career; see below for a detailed description.

MIRROR SPELLS

Below are several spells relating to mirrors, reflection, and visual effects. If desired, these spells can be introduced into a campaign all at once by allowing the characters to find the spellbook of a mirror mage, such as the one detailed above. Alternatively, one or two such spells could be introduced at a time through scrolls or research.

Mirror Eyes

Abjuration
Level: Sor/Wiz 2
Components: V, S, M
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Touch
Target: Creature touched
Duration: 1 minute/level
Saving Throw: Will negates (harmless)
Spell Resistance: Yes (harmless)

When this spell is cast, the subject's eyes appear reflective and the subject gains the ability to resist harmful visual effects. For the duration of the spell, the subject has a +10 resistance bonus on saving throws against the gaze attacks of monsters such as basilisks and cockatrices, as well as the gaze effects of spells and spell-like abilities such as *eyebite.* The same bonus applies to saves against spells that affect vision, such as *glitterdust* and *blindness.* The subject is also immune to being dazzled by any visual effect.

Arcane Material Component: A fragment of mother-of-pearl.

Transparency

Transmutation
Level: Sor/Wiz 3
Components: V, S, M
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Close (25 ft. + 5 ft./2 levels)
Target: 10-foot cube of inanimate material per level
Duration: 1 minute/level
Saving Throw: Fortitude negates (object)
Spell Resistance: Yes (object)

This spell makes a volume of material as transparent as glass. This volume must be contiguous but need not constitute a whole object—sections of wall, doors, or the like can be affected. The *transparency* effect does not block line of sight, but it does block line of effect.

Transparency can be made permanent via a *permanency* spell by a caster of at least 11th level at a cost of 1,500 XP.

Durability

Transmutation
Level: Clr 2, Sor/Wiz 3
Components: V, S
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Touch
Target: One object of up to 10 cu. ft. per level
Duration: 1 minute/level
Saving Throw: Fortitude negates (object)
Spell Resistance: Yes

A single object gains a hardness of 10 for the duration of the spell, without changing any of its other properties. The armor bonus of nonmetallic armor affected by this spell increases by +1, but its armor check penalty worsens by 1 and its arcane spell failure chance increases by 5%.

Durability may be made permanent by a caster of at least 11th level at a cost of 1,500 XP.

REVISION 3.5 UPDATE

by Ed Stark

There's been a lot of reaction to the announcement of the revised versions of the core rulebooks. Not nearly as much as when we announced "3E," of course, but "3.5" is making more than a few ripples in the roleplaying pond. This reaction has lead to a not-so-startling observation about the gaming industry:

Gamers and game designers think a lot alike.

You might be surprised, but the general reactions to our plans for D&D 3.5 received about the same disparity of reactions around the office that they did when word hit the streets. A few people didn't like the idea *at all*. "It's too soon!" they said, or they asked suspiciously, "Is this just a way to sell more books?"

But more people were intrigued, and they asked questions:

"Will we add all the errata we've found?"

"Will there be new material, maybe taken from support products or created whole cloth?"

"Can we clean up some of the rules to better support high-level play, miniatures use, and other ways people play?"

"Do I need to get all-new, revised versions of the support product I've spent the better part of three years collecting?"

Yes, yes, yes, and no. On the last one, a very strong *no*. I'm not sure how you feel about it, but I certainly don't want to spend the next three years revising material we spent the last three years writing. Yes, we'll make a few updates and compilations, but I'd have to nip off and do myself an injury if I had to go through the same products year after year.

Now that that's settled, let's get on with this month's updates.

Running the Game

Dungeon Masters are the lifeblood of D&D. Let's face it—without a DM, you don't have much of a game, and Wizards of the Coast doesn't produce games it doesn't want played. As I said last month, a big focus for the new edition of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS that we want to extend even farther into the 3.5 Revision is the maxim: "Tools, not Rules." We want to help you, the Dungeon Master, do it yourself—better, faster, and easier. If we do a good enough job, perhaps some of your players will take over occasionally and give you a break. You never know: You might get a chance to play that 15th-level half-orc monk you've been dreaming about.

PH 3.5: Combat Upgrade

The current *Player's Handbook* spends thirty-five pages outlining the rules of combat for not only the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game but every d20 game or supplement in existence. Because combat is a big part of the D&D experience, this section has been road-tested as much as any rules system ever in existence. Suffice it to say, we've learned some things over the last three years about what our audience needs this chapter to do, and 3.5 takes a serious stab at making this chapter much more accessible.

It even cleans up a few rules elements we weren't satisfied with as well.

We took one example from the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* and *d20 Modern's* efforts at clarity. In D&D 3.0, we had a variety of different types of actions: free actions, partial actions, move-equivalent actions, standard actions, and full-round actions. This variety covered pretty much everything we needed to talk about happening during a combat round, but it got messy sometimes. Quick, without looking, when can you use a partial action? What can you do during a move-equivalent action that isn't actually movement? Throw in a few feats or combat maneuvers and you get more questions: Can you use Spring Attack during a charge? If you have the Quick Draw feat, can you draw your weapon as part of a move and sheathe it as a free action?

The answers to these questions are all in there, and "Sage Advice" has spent a lot of time answering these and questions just like them. The *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* and *d20 Modern* helped out some by cleaning up the action list. Now, we have only four basic types of actions: free, standard, move, and full-round. The lists of what fits where have been cleaned up, and the presentation of each action type is clearer and more concise.

Trust me, you'll believe it when you see it, but the combat chapter's a little too long to publish here.

IT'S NOT JUST 3E, IT'S 3D!

One of our principle designers made the joke that we should call the 3.5 revision "3ED" because we've finally embraced the miniatures aspect of the D&D experience. Let's face it: The D&D game started as a pure miniatures game and is now a roleplaying game that fully integrates miniatures and tactical movement into the game system. The D&D revision fully acknowledges that fact by providing stronger, more concise rules on the use of a battlemat and miniatures in a typical D&D game.

This doesn't mean that you have to have minis to play D&D 3.5—any more than you had to have them for 3E. Miniature figures and a battlemat are simply an excellent way of helping players and DMs visualize the action of what's going on in the roleplaying environment. If you've played all this time without ever using miniatures in your game, you can survive without them under 3.5. If you like minis, though, you'll like what we've done to the presentation of the D&D rules.

DMG 3.5: Getting Templated

No, we're not creating a fiendish vampiric *DUNGEON MASTER'S Guide* for the 3.5 upgrade. What I mean here is that the revised *DUNGEON MASTER'S Guide* takes yet another step in making the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS experience more DM friendly, particularly in the area of running and adjudicating combat.

At the time of this writing, we were working hard to come up with a collection of standardized battlegrid diagrams and templates that DMs and players could use to help run complex or unusual skirmishes in a game session. We noticed that somewhere around 90% of all our spell effects, monster abilities, and other measurements fell into a small number of measurement categories. Well, we've done what we can to standardize these effects into a small number of categories with meaningful differences. It is our hope that when the 3.5 revision to the *DUNGEON MASTER'S Guide* is finished, you'll have a set of easily useable diagrams you

can wield on the gaming table to keep questions and disputes to a minimum.

MM 3.5: Tactical Maneuvers

Believe it or not, we've heard a lot of questions over the course of the last three years about how DMs are supposed to run monsters. I actually had someone send me a note once saying how disappointed they were with the power level of the mind flayer. "It's supposed to be a CR 8 encounter, but my 6th-level party thinks of mind flayers as speed bumps! They shouldn't be any tougher than CR 5!"

Okay, so some of you are probably wincing at that, while others might agree. For those of you who just don't believe it, I bet you can think of a few creatures in the current *Monster Manual* that don't live up to their CRs.

Part of this, I admit, is that judging a Challenge Rating is a tricky thing. We're going to provide you with more tools and advice for doing this with the monsters you create, by the way, but this month we're talking *tactics*. We decided that one of the reasons DMs might be having trouble running particularly tricky monsters might be because the designers of those monsters don't give enough advice on what the critters are intended to do in a combat situation. While working on 3.5, we picked out a few of the most interesting D&D monsters and gave them a round-by-round tactical section that looks something like this:

Mind Flayer Tactics

The mind flayer is most effective as a ranged combatant, using its spell-like abilities to attack from a distance.

Round 0: Use *detect thoughts* to scout foes and determine threat potential. (Highly intelligent creatures are considered most dangerous; creatures of lower intelligence are potential pawns and food.)

Round 1: Mind blast.

Round 2: If most of the party is stunned, cast *charm monster* on a remaining foe. If most of the party is not stunned, maintain distance and use *mind blast* again.

Round 3: If one or fewer foes remain unstunned, order any charmed foes to protect you. Grapple a stunned foe with tentacles. If a majority of the party remains unstunned, flee using *levitate* or, if necessary, *plane shift*.

Round 4: If still in a position of strength, start eating brains. Use charmed foes to guard you. If in a position of weakness, *plane shift*, perhaps with grappled foe.

Mind flayers work well as "boss monsters." If it has minions, it varies its tactics to suit.

Round 0: Dispatch minions with orders to assault foes from one side of the battlefield. Use *levitate* and cover to take a safe command position, preferably out of obvious sight.

Round 1: Order minions into optimal positions using *telepathy*. If the opportunity presents itself, use *mind blast* on foes (without hitting minions if possible—but they're all expendable). If the battlefield is too congested, use *charm monster* or *suggestion* to sow confusion in foes.

Round 2: Identify enemy spellcasters and order minions telepathically to assualt them at all costs. Focus your spell-like abilities on lesser foes.

Round 3: Order charmed foes toward you (telepathically). Grapple them. Have minions keep uncharmed, unstunned foes busy.

Round 4: Eat brains.

If your party thinks the mind flayer is a "speed bump" at CR 8, try that out on them.

On a similar note, though, we don't focus our tactics information entirely on ways to more effectively beat your PCs to death with interesting monsters. That isn't the focus of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game, after all. The focus is on having *fun*. The revisions and additions to the *Monster Manual* aren't just about making the monsters more challenging or even more interesting, but about making them more fun to run, play, or defeat.

That is, of course, the focus of the entire revision, in fact. At Wizards of the Coast we strongly believe DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is a darn fine roleplaying game, whatever rules you use. We even more strongly believe that the 3.5 upgrade to the D&D game makes it even more fun.

We hope that when you see the whole thing, you'll agree.

In the meantime, feel free to check in at our website: **www.wizards.com** if you'd like to see more interesting news and exciting tidbits on the 3.5 revision. Visit the message boards and talk to others with the same interests and questions you have. I'll be back next month with some more updates and sample material. Until then, good gaming!

DRAGON AND D&D 3.5

by Jesse Decker

As a *DRAGON* reader, you might be wondering how the upcoming revision is going to affect the magazine. Those of you who have been with us for a long time know that we're dedicated to supporting the most current version of the D&D rules. That means that once 3.5 arrives, we'll make the change too. Those worried about the revision should be happy to hear that it's very easy to use 3.5 material with the current rules and vice versa. Even if you don't make the switch, you'll have no trouble using material from the magazine in your game.

REVISING THE REVISIONS

Before we go too much farther with these articles, I'd like to make one thing perfectly clear. As I write each of these updates, a team of designers and editors are slaving away trying to get the revised *Player's Handbook*, *DUNGEON MASTER's Guide*, and *Monster Manual* ready for publication. And, this time around, we've added a little more pressure. Just to make things interesting, we're going to release all three books in the same month.

If you've never been in the publishing industry, you might not know how tough this is. Anyway, one of the things they don't need is to be held to anything I might write in one of these articles. So, it's friendly warning time: Any updated material I show you in one of these articles just might get "tweaked" (read: anything from slightly modified to completely revised) before it sees print in one of the three hardcovers. I don't anticipate a lot of this, but I think we'd all rather have the core books right. Right?

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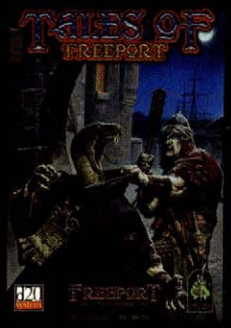

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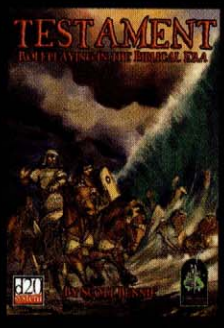

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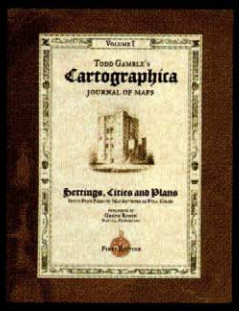

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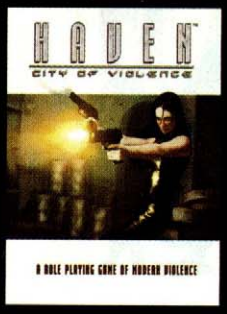

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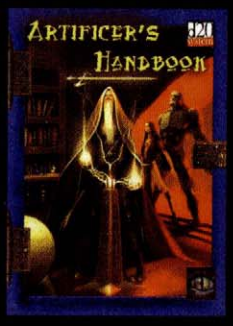

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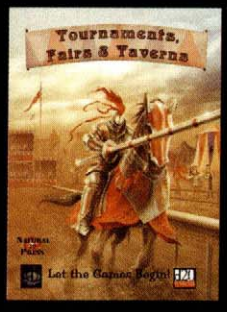

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THE BLADEWORKS

by Andy Collins · illustrated by Tim Lee

Although the Bladeworks began as a guild of weaponsmiths, its leader soon realized that he could drastically increase membership by welcoming not only those who crafted weapons, but also those who used them. In a matter of months, the guild went from a dozen members to half a hundred. Now, five years later, the group numbers almost one hundred, including sellswords, soldiers, guardsmen, adventurers, and even a few craftsmen. Although a vocal minority complains that the guild has lost its focus, most members enjoy the political (not to mention economic) power that the organization now wields.

The current guildmaster, a semi-retired adventurer named Justinian, took control of the Bladeworks barely more than a year ago. As only the second guildmaster of the organization, he has much to live up to. Justinian has recently stepped up recruitment of local warriors, counting on these new members both to fill guild coffers and to bolster his support within the organization.

SIZE AND RESOURCES

In the small city of Stormpoint, the Bladeworks is a major organization, primarily because of its good connections in both the economic and political spheres of influence. As might be expected, most of the resources it gains from these connections take the form of weapons and their component materials, but the guild's business ventures bring a fair amount of coin into its coffers as well.

The Bladeworks also counts a number of local adventurers as allies. Although they are not full-fledged members, numerous such free agents can be called upon to assist Justinian and his guild in a pinch.

ALIGNMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Twenty years ago, Justinian was a well-known fortune-seeker in the region. Now on the downward slope of forty, the former adventurer feels time creeping up on him and wants to leave a lasting mark on the world. His strategy is twofold: He plans to continue building the power and resources of the Bladeworks in Stormpoint while also expanding into other nearby cities. To the latter end, he encourages guild members to actively recruit new blood in their

travels. He also makes a serious effort to sign up adventurers and mercenaries who are merely passing through the city, offering guild discounts and other benefits as needed to sweeten the deal.

Overall, the guild membership has a healthy respect for the law. Many members are current or former soldiers or guards, and even the smiths rely on an orderly city to protect their businesses. That said, the guild also knows the value of a conflict—after all, one can always sell more weapons during a war.

MEMBERSHIP AND DEMOGRAPHICS

In his haste to grow the guild, Justinian has relaxed recruitment standards considerably. In the early days of the Bladeworks, new members were chosen with great care; today, the guild welcomes all backgrounds, races, and creeds. Justinian tells himself that a few bad apples can't ruin the whole barrel, but some members have begun whispering that the former guildmaster's stricter recruitment policies might have been preferable.

Justinian's chief rival for power in the Bladeworks is Gulthia Ironhammer. She resents Justinian because she believes that he has turned his back on the guild's true purpose: to provide a voice for the weaponsmiths of the city. But as Justinian's relentless recruitment drive continues, Ironhammer's support continues to weaken. Even her apprentice, Murdock Timbers, has become a convert to Justinian's cause.

With the guildmaster so busy, the duties of instruction have fallen to Garissa Sunglade, formerly of the Royal Army. She has organized the guild's training operations in a typically military fashion, with two 3rd-level fighter "sergeants" serving under her.

Bearic Dunleavy serves as Justinian's chief recruiter. With the help of his assistant, the glib Meleanna, Bearic keeps the coffers well filled with guild dues. Another important link in the recruitment chain is the nomadic Renard, who spreads word of the Bladeworks as he travels from town to town.

One of Justinian's best moves in recent months was inviting Carson Hucrele to join the guild. A member of the prominent Hucrele merchant family of Helmsport, Carson imagines himself a better swordsman than he is, but Justinian doesn't mind—the aristocrat's generous donations more than make up for his shortcomings. Carson has even recruited a couple of his noble friends, Cherin Allister and Stim Bailey, adding to the organization's political clout. In addition, the twins Thorsson and Dagmar, bodyguards to Cherin and Stim, have followed their employers into the guild.

Another coup was the recruitment of the master swordsmith Hurmen, known locally as "The Anvil." Hurmen and his apprentice Stricha, along with her brother Gorgvall, moved to Stormpoint several months ago from the larger city of Helmsport, thanks in no small part to Justinian's active recruiting efforts.

Although Justinian hasn't been able to add a spellcaster of repute to the group, he has recently recruited two 1st-level wizards.

IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

The Bladeworks can be a useful ally and source of services for one or more PCs (particularly fighter-types). The guild provides training and similar services at no cost to its members. Basic membership is only 1 silver piece per week, or 5 gp per year. An associate member pays 100 gp in dues annually but enjoys a 10% discount on all weapons purchased from other guild members.

The Bladeworks can also provide ready-made campaign hooks. Should a traveling member go missing, Justinian might hire some adventurers to track down the wayward weaponsmith. Or, if a local thieves' guild were to set its sights on smiths, Justinian wouldn't hesitate to pay would-be investigators well for their efforts. In either case, of course, Justinian would certainly look for likely recruits among the characters while using their services.

On the other hand, the Bladeworks might become a political foe of the PCs, particularly if they shun Justinian's recruitment efforts. Maybe another guild or a noble family has been providing the PCs with training and support, and Justinian takes offense, bringing the power of his guild to bear against the PCs and their patron either directly or indirectly. Alternatively, the characters might have the opportunity to befriend Gulthia Ironhammer and work to raise her standing in the Bladeworks.

THE BLADEWORKS

The Bladeworks (major): AL LN; 15,000-gp resource limit; Membership 92; Integrated (human 73, halfling 8, half-elf 5, dwarf 3, other 4).

Authority Figures: Justinian, male human Ftr 11; Gulthia Ironhammer, female dwarf Exp 14.

Important Characters: Bearic Dunleavy, male half-elf Rog 3; Carson Hucrele, male human Ari 2; Cherin Allister, human female Ari 1; Garissa Sunglade, female half-elf Ftr 6; Gorgvall, male dwarf War 5; Hurmen "The Anvil," male human Exp 7 (master swordsmith); Meleanna, female elf Brd 1; Murdock Timbers, male halfling Exp 3; Renard, male halfling Rgr 2; Stim Bailey, human male Ari 1; Stricha, female dwarf Exp 3; Thorsson and Dagmar, male and female dwarf War 2.

Others: Mixed; Exp 1 (15), Ftr 3 (2), Ftr 1 (30), Rog 1 (5), Rgr 1 (4), War 1 (15), Wiz 1 (2).

Symbol: Pair of crossed swords; one shiny silver, the other black as night.

NEW FEATS

Justinian and his staff pride themselves on providing the best-quality training for all the guild's battle-minded members. It's no secret that Justinian himself was a swashbuckler during his adventuring days, not a heavily armored, ground-pounding soldier. Thus, he brings to the guild some techniques that are not often found in organizations catering to fighters.

During his adventuring career, Justinian "invented" two new feats that focus on using agility in combat. These feats can be available only from Justinian himself, or (at the DM's option) characters might be able to learn them from some of his previous students who have gone on to plant the seeds of the Bladeworks in other cities.

Limiting the feats to those characters whom Justinian or other Bladeworks members have contacted introduces an interesting twist on the prerequisites of other feats. Allowing characters, monsters, and NPCs to acquire a feat only after they have adventured or trained with the right teachers adds

depth to a campaign world and provides an easy way to distinguish one culture's fighting styles from another. For example, perhaps elves, masters of acrobatic fighting techniques, are the only ones that can take the Spring Attack feat.

Agile Riposte [General]

You have learned to strike when your opponent is most vulnerable—at the same instant he or she strikes at you.

Prerequisites: Dex 13+, Dodge, Weapon Finesse, base attack +1 or higher.

Benefit: If the opponent you have designated as your Dodge target (see the Dodge feat in the *Player's Handbook*) misses you with a melee attack or melee touch attack and you are wielding a weapon you have chosen for the Weapon Finesse feat, you may attempt an attack of opportunity against that opponent.

This feat can be used only once per round, even if you are allowed more than one attack of opportunity each round.

Special: A fighter may select Agile Riposte as one of his fighter bonus feats (see Chapter 3: Classes in the *Player's Handbook*).

Note: This feat appeared first in *d20 Modern*. This version, slightly modified from the original, is a variant suggested for use with D&D.

Deceptive Dodge [General]

You can assume a defensive posture that allows you to redirect melee attacks made against you.

Prerequisite: Dex 13+, Int 13+, Dodge, Expertise, base attack bonus +4.

Benefit: When a melee attack by your dodge target misses you while you are fighting defensively, that attack has a chance to strike another target of your choice that is both adjacent to you and within the attacker's reach. The attacker must make a new attack roll for the redirected attack, using the same modifiers that were applied to the missed attack.

You may use this feat once per round. If there are no other targets adjacent to you and within the attacker's reach, you can't have attacks strike others.

Special: A fighter may select Deceptive Dodge as one of his fighter bonus feats (see Chapter 3: Classes in the *Player's Handbook*). D

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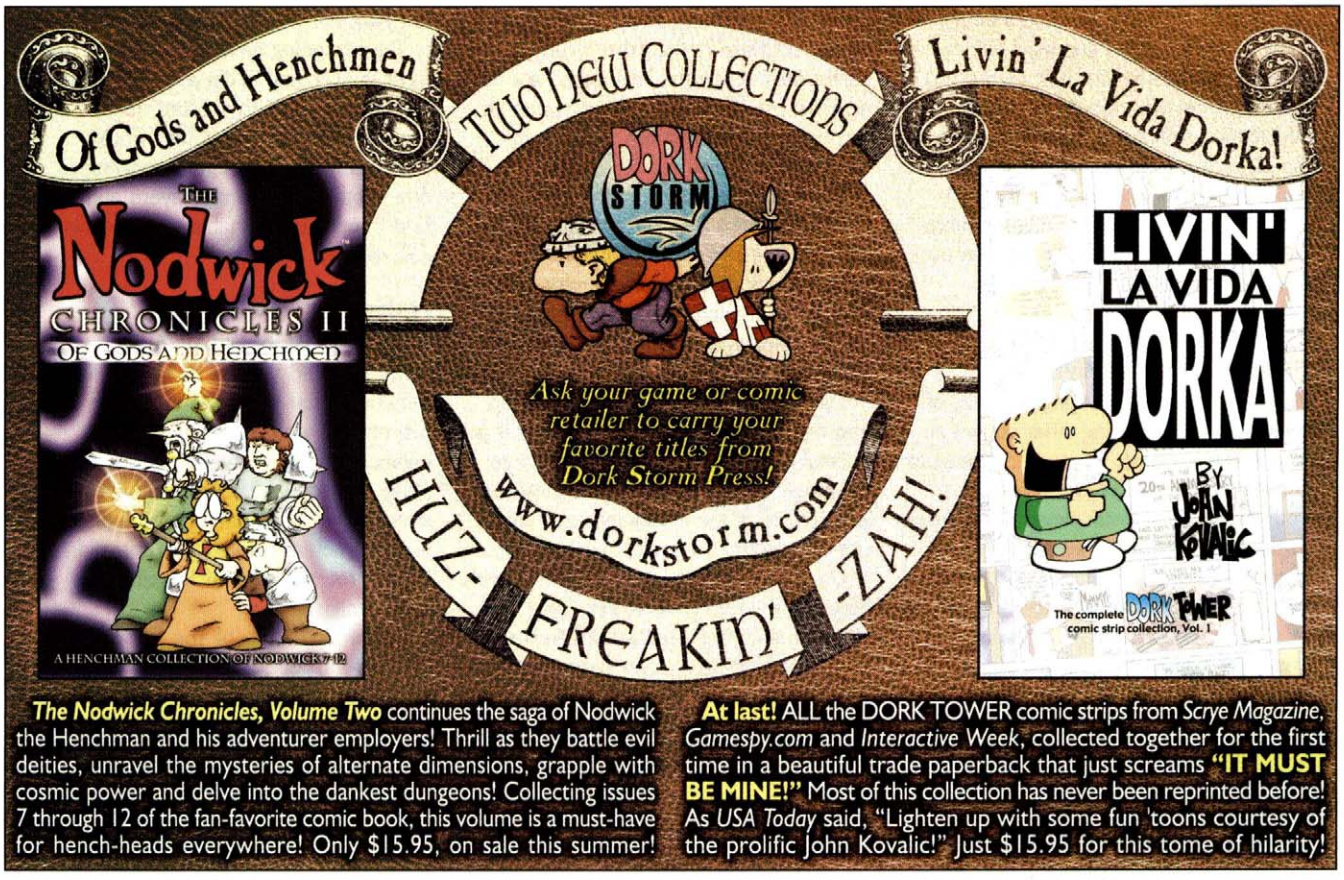
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Can You Keep a Secret?

by Eric Cagle

DM: *"Okay, your rogue failed to disable the trap, and a huge stone drops from the ceiling, separating the party into two groups. What do you do now?"*

Player 1 (to Player 2): *"Hey, I know! Have your rogue pull on that other lever that we saw down the hallway."*

DM (to Player 1): *"Um, your character isn't there to tell him that. You have six feet of stone between you."*

DM (to Player 2): *"So, what does your rogue do?"*

Player 2: *"Uh, I'll pull the other lever that we saw. . . ."*

At one point or another, most players abuse their in-game knowledge, blurting out things that their characters couldn't know or giving ideas and suggestions to other characters when their own aren't around. A certain amount of such information sharing is inevitable when all the players are sitting around a table and the story is provided by the DM, and most such gaffes are unintentional. But sometimes the situation can get out of hand.

PLAYER KNOWLEDGE VS. CHARACTER KNOWLEDGE

One of the most challenging aspects of roleplaying is balancing what you as a player know against what your character knows. Even if you're not aware of it, you always bring your player knowledge to the table, and that information can easily bleed into game play. Just because you happen to be an engineer, doctor, or chemist doesn't mean that your character has any knowledge about these subjects. Chapter 1: Dungeon Mastering in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* has a section entitled "Metagame Thinking," which discusses this subject in more depth. Because you are "above and beyond" the level of your character's experience, you naturally become aware of everything that is said around the table. Thus, you know which spells have been cast, which monsters are present and where they are, and (if you know the books well) what abilities the party's opponents might possess—whether or not your character would logically be able to have such knowledge.

"I have a great idea! We should split up!"

Metagame thinking often comes into play when groups split up. Those in one group are inevitably tempted to offer advice to those in the other group, particularly when the "advisors" are not actively playing. Such situations can be incredibly frustrating for the person running the game.

The following advice to the GM was written by Mike Selinker, creator of the *Marvel Super Heroes™ Adventure Game*. Although originally written with that game in mind, this excerpt applies to any roleplaying game, regardless of the genre:

"Sooner or later, characters split up into two or more groups. While this is a normal part of any game, it can prove challenging to balance what each group is aware of. If the characters split up outside a fight, it's usually no big deal. You switch your attention back and forth between the two groups, resolving one situation and then another. While the first group of players is roleplaying their characters' encounter with the dragon, the other group of players is getting snacks in the kitchen.

"In a fight, though, keep the exchanges running on a one-by-one basis. If one group of characters gets actions during an exchange, so should the other group. As long as it aids the pacing of the game, you can warp time a bit so that one group's actions may take five minutes and another group's take 30 seconds.

"Each group can't know what the other knows, unless the characters have commlinks or telepaths or somesuch. So if one group blows up the bridge, the other characters won't know this as they're careening toward the bridge in their Jeep. As Narrator, you should enforce this rule rigidly: *The players can act only on what their heroes know.*"

The foregoing advice represents the most logical (and often most desirable) level of information sharing—none beyond what the characters would reasonably be capable of imparting to one another. But some players and GMs find it more comfortable to relax this rule slightly.

LEVELS OF INFORMATION SHARING

Where should you as DM draw the line between what someone knows as a player and what her character is aware of? The answer depends on the style and tone of your campaign. In some cases, a commingling of player and character knowledge is unavoidable, if only for the sake of keeping the story rolling.

Below are some of the various levels of interaction between player and character information that can be allowed in campaigns. Figuring out which level is the most acceptable (and

fun) for you and your players can be a big help in designing adventures that are satisfying for all.

Everyone Knows Everything

This level is appropriate for most hack-and-slash games in which combat is the main activity. It is assumed that characters yell out what they are seeing to their allies and that the monsters they fight either don't understand or are oblivious to what they hear. Alternatively, you can rationalize that the characters are so in tune with the other party members that they simply know what's going on with their companions at all times. However, this bit of logic can be seriously stretched if the party gets separated for a long period of time.

Suspension of Disbelief

This level is the default for most gaming sessions. The players stick to what their characters would know, but sometimes the DM adjusts how information is passed along to allow the session to flow more smoothly. Characters sometimes do or know things that only the player should be aware of, but they "play dumb" most of the time. Metgaming issues are few, but they occur occasionally.

Reality Bites

This level of metagame is the same as reality. If a character isn't there, he simply doesn't know what's going on. Transmission of advice and knowledge between players is kept to a minimum, and information exchange between characters doesn't exist unless a player specifically says, "I yell out that I see the bugbear coming up behind him." This level of information exchange works best for games focusing on gritty reality or cloak-and-dagger adventures in which uncovering secrets and information is an important aspect of the whole gaming experience. The DM in such a game strictly enforces the "no metagaming" rule, penalizing players for infractions.

ALLOWING INSTANT COMMUNICATION

If you like the "everyone knows everything" level of information sharing described above but still want some internal logic to your game, you might consider making methods of instant communication available to the characters.

Magical Information Aids

Because the D&D game uses magic (and in some cases, psionics), there are numerous spells, spell-like abilities, and powers that can allow characters to share information without problems. Just make sure the characters have ready access to such abilities, and they can share information without eroding the logic of the game situation.

Ventriloquism: As long as a character doesn't care what others in the area might hear, *ventriloquism* is a useful spell for sending a message without revealing who said it. It is typically used to broadcast a few words that a character wants all of his or her allies to hear.

Message: This spell can be very useful in both combat and noncombat situations. *Message* is also useful because it can target multiple creatures, allowing the sender to transmit information to everyone in the party without raising her voice.

Whispering Wind: This spell works better on a strategic level than a tactical one because it targets a specific area rather than a person. Still, it allows a character to relay a message to another party member, as long as the intended recipient is not entirely enclosed in a building or in some place that a breeze could not get into. Because the sender must be familiar with the area in some way, *whispering wind* is useful for relaying messages back to a home base or wherever the other characters are waiting.

Animal Messenger: Like *whispering wind,* the *animal messenger* spell can get information back to allies. However, an animal can carry only tokens and bits of paper. It cannot communicate verbally, unless one of the recipients has the ability to talk to animals in some way.

Clairvoyance/Clairaudience: Although these spells transmit information only one way, they can still allow a character to see or hear what another character is doing. By keeping tabs on a character who is scouting ahead, the party members can be informed about what happens to their comrade and act accordingly.

Rary's Telepathic Bond: This spell is the ultimate explanation for playing in the everyone-knows-everything style. It can allow the entire party to constantly communicate regardless of distance.

Mindlink/Lesser Mindlink: If your campaign allows psionics, these powers are simple and elegant ways of allowing characters to share information instantly. *Lesser mindlink* allows communication with only one other character, while *mindlink* works on multiple beings. Characters can pass along any amount of information they wish through these powers.

CONTROLLING METAGAMING ISSUES

If you prefer the "suspension of disbelief" or "reality bites" level of information sharing, how exactly do you prevent your players from passing along information to others when they shouldn't be able to do so? Letting a player slip every once in a while is fine, as long as the incident doesn't break the suspension of disbelief inherent in the game. If the practice becomes more and more common, though, you probably need to take some action.

Have a Talk

If a certain player imparts inappropriate knowledge over and over, you should mention it—she might not even be aware of the problem. Encourage the player to stick to the "contract" that all roleplaying gamers adhere to—a player portrays a completely different character,with different thoughts, goals, beliefs, and knowledge.

Curve Ball

One good way to disrupt metagame thinking is to throw the players a curve. When they expect a situation to play out in a certain way because they simply "know" that's how it should be, do

WARNING SIGNS OF PLAYER INFORMATION ABUSE

It's usually pretty easy to tell if a player lets personal knowledge slip into the game when it's not appropriate. Here are some of the warning signs that you should keep an eye out for.

- The player uses "modern" knowledge, such as knowledge of physics, medicine, engineering, or other technical subjects. Such a player might try to create technological items, such as gunpowder, or introduce modern ideas into the campaign world.
- The player continually blurts out suggestions, advice, and tactics to the other players during combat.
- The player switches the actions of his character based on the reactions of the players (as opposed to the characters).

something different. For example, if the players figure that the evil wizard they're hunting is likely to have access to *teleport,* and they arm themselves to defeat this tactic, just have their foe rely on a good old-fashioned escape route (full of traps, of course) instead of teleporting out of danger. Keep the characters thinking on their feet, and teach them never to expect something simply because it's listed in the book or because they think that it's "what any wizard would do."

Reward and Punishment

If player knowledge is creeping into your game, allowing characters to know or do unreasonable things, you might find the "carrot and stick" approach helpful. The technique is simple: Reward players who keep their knowledge in check and punish players who abuse the unwritten rule that characters don't know everything their players know.

One way to implement this approach is to use actual, physical tokens as rewards and punishment. When a player reins in his or her knowledge in a situation where it would be helpful but inappropriate, give him or her a token that provides a +2 circumstance bonus on any check, save, attack roll, or damage roll, redeemable whenever the player desires. Alternatively, such a token could allow the character to succeed automatically at a given task (at your discretion, of course). Conversely, a player who abuses his knowledge ("Sure my character is an uneducated barbarian from the tundra, but everyone knows that magnets are drawn to iron") should be warned and given a black token, indicating an in-game infraction. The black token either imposes a -2 penalty on any save, skill check, attack roll, or damage roll, or it results in automatic failure of some action. You as DM decide when to "call in" a black token and apply the penalty.

The token technique is a good way to keep metagame thinking from resulting in inappropriate actions, although you must be careful not to be too heavy-handed when issuing penalties and not to give out too many reward tokens to your favorite player.

Fines

You might use a "stick-only" approach to players who pass along information when they're not supposed to. They keep a jar on the table, and every time a player violates the rule, she has to put a quarter in the jar. This tactic serves as a good reminder not to share information when it's not possible, but if the jar fills up fast enough that the group can pay for that night's pizza, you might want to reconsider the style of your game and try to see why information sharing is so rampant.

Is That What You Say?

Light banter is typical at any gaming table, and it's easy for players to talk out of turn or to say things in a joking manner. However, if such banter occurs at a critical moment—say when the characters are negotiating a deal with a dragon that has captured one of their companions—it's important to call them on it. Simply asking "Is that what you say?" should be enough to make the players cognizant of their words and keep them focused on the matter at hand. Some groups even create signals or signs to indicate when players are speaking out of character, in order to discuss plans or ask questions of the DM. This way, there is no mistaking whether it is the player or the character speaking.

Passing Notes

One of the best ways to control the flow of information is to use notes to pass along information to players. This technique allows you to make sure that only the player who should receive the little tidbit of information gets it. (Of course, you should take the note back if the information is sensitive.) For example, suppose you secretly make a Will save for one of the characters, who fails, placing him under the influence of a *charm person* spell. Secretly pass that player a note telling him or her to react favorably to the sorcerer who cast the spell, but to otherwise act normally. If all goes as it should, none of the other characters will be any the wiser.

Another use of notes is to enforce silent communication. Normally, characters communicating through magical or psionic telepathy simply talk among themselves. However, using notes is an excellent way to illustrate that characters are communicating through silent means and that not everyone can listen in on the conversation. Other than magical or psionic communication, however, players should not be allowed to pass notes to one another, unless they are playing in an "everyone knows everything" style of campaign.

KEEPING THE PEACE

If you choose to use either the "suspension of disbelief" or the "reality bites" metagaming style and you want to implement one of the control systems noted above, you should talk to your group ahead of time and get your players to agree on the method that will be in use. If they begin to look miserable whenever they are penalized for breaking the metagaming rules, you might want to consider lightening up on enforcement or changing your campaign style. It's important that you don't punish the players just for trying to have fun!

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Dungeoncraft

Fantasy Cities, Part 2 Building a City

by Monte Cook

Part 1 of this series dealt with using cities in your game in a very general way. But what if you need to design a whole city—one that's going to get a lot of use and thus needs a lot of detail? This installment of 'Dungeoncraft' gives you guidelines for creating an entire fantasy city for your D&D game.

THE BASICS

Before you start designing your city in earnest, you need to determine three basic factors: its terrain, its purpose, and its history.

Terrain

Nearby geographical features, as well as the terrain upon which a city is actually built, influence many aspects of its residents' lives. Just like a real-world city, a fantasy city should be built near a ready source of water. Likewise, proximity to a large supply of food is vital. The larger the city, the more important these two factors become.

Defensibility is the next consideration. Cities are often built on high ground to make defense easier. For example, a city situated atop a plateau or high up on a cliff is relatively easy to defend, particularly if the only approach from below is a narrow footpath. But high ground is not the only option. If defense is important (and it usually is), city planners can make creative use ofany advantageous terrain features. For example, a city could be built on an island in a river, accessible only by boat or by two defensible bridges. Remember, however, that the inhabitants must be able to defend their city not only from political enemies (such as invading armies), but also from the dangerous monsters that populate your campaign world.

Given a choice, most city planners prefer to build on a flat, dry expanse of ground. But sometimes there is no flat ground available, and now and then a city originally built on such a perfect site outgrows it. Thus, many large cities sprawl across hills or around natural obstacles like lakes, rivers, or huge rock formations. A town built on top of one hill can, in time, grow into a city resting upon multiple hills, and a village built on one side of a river can expand to both sides. Typical city builders can terrace hills to make them easier to build upon and erect bridges across rivers for convenience, but they don't possess the skill or power to do much more terrain adaptation than that.

Clearly, the surrounding terrain also determines what building materials are available. In a region with few trees, buildings are probably made of stone or something similar, such as adobe or brick. Importing building materials from other regions is possible, but it is economically feasible only if the community is very wealthy and located on good shipping routes.

Climate also falls under terrain effects for the purpose of creating a city. The buildings must be designed to protect the residents from whatever weather conditions might pose a problem. Is it cold? Then buildings should be sturdy, compact, close together, and equipped with fireplaces. Is it rainy? Then buildings are likely to be made out of stone whenever possible, to prevent rot. (Alternatively, perhaps the people have learned how to treat wood to make it last, or maybe they are simply accustomed to rebuilding frequently.) If inclement weather is not a major concern, buildings might be very open—in fact, even tents might suffice for shelter.

Let's look at an extreme example of how terrain might affect a city. A settlement built upon a magic island that floats in the clouds would have no nearby water or food, though it should be very defensible. Access might be difficult and expensive, so special thought must be given to how the residents get water, food, and building materials—not to mention virtually anything else they need. Furthermore, such a city would be at the mercy of the weather, so buildings must be constructed to protect residents from all manner of storms.

Purpose

A city's purpose often has to do with economics—that is, how its populace makes a living. Sometimes, however, a city's major purpose is defense—giving its residents a safe place to sleep at night. It's up to you to choose a viable purpose for your city. Is it a central marketplace for farmers? A port for shipping and receiving goods via the sea? A handy stopping place at an important crossroads? Or perhaps just a

place of safety in a wilderness fraught with danger?

Don't get too caught up in the mundane when answering questions like these—you are dealing with fantasy, after all. Is the important crossroads a *gate* to another plane? Is the city a port built on a mountainside, where flying ships can be berthed while loading and unloading goods?

The two general purposes noted above, commerce and defense, are often at odds with one another—that is, designing for one inhibits the other. Cities designed entirely for defense are usually hard to reach, and that situation tends to stifle trade. Imagine, for example, a city at the edge of a precipice that is accessible only via a single bridge, or a city that can be reached only by navigating a maze, or a city built on an island surrounded by treacherous rocks and reefs. These are all fine ideas for defensibility, but such places would certainly not be major sites of commerce. On the other hand, cities designed to facilitate trade are usually easy to reach and difficult to defend. A city built for commerce often has several access roads and possibly a port. It might be surrounded by a wall with multiple gates, or it might have no wall at all. The main streets are wide enough to accommodate herds of animals or wagonloads of goods, and the central portion of the city is probably a huge marketplace. This kind of design makes trade easy, but defense is tough because of the sheer number of access points. Thus it comes down to this: Design your city with an eye toward either commerce or defensibility, but remember that it can't do both well.

History

A city's history incorporates its purpose to some extent, but it also defines how that purpose has changed over time as well as how the city has grown. Structures within and around the city might reflect its history. For example, suppose a city started as a small walled village built for defense, then grew into a commercial center as the area was settled. The old walls might still stand, but now their only function is to mark the edge of the "old town," separating it from the newer sections. An old city built in such a way might have rings of different walls—almost like the rings of a tree—that mark the ever-changing outer edge of the city as it grew. On the other hand, if a city was attacked and destroyed long ago, and then a new city was built atop the ruins, an extensive, buried "undercity" might be awaiting discovery.

INTERNAL CITY DESIGN

Now that you know your city's terrain, purpose, and history, you must decide its level of technology, its predominant race, its overall layout, and what districts it has. These factors will help you decide what the buildings and thoroughfares should look like.

Technology

More than any other single factor, the builders' level of technology determines what a city looks like. A high level of technology coupled with access to proper building materials can produce a city with sophisticated architecture and exceptional beauty. A lower level of technology almost always results in a shabbier, rougher look.

Did the people who built your city have the know-how and skill to build multiple-story structures with finished roofs, or are the buildings simply glorified shacks? Does the city have a working sewer system, or does the waste just run through the streets? Does the place boast glorious silver domes and tall white spires, or does it have a rustic appearance? Do the windows of the buildings have glass, or are they simply openings in the wall with wooden shutters to cover them? Are the streets paved with cobblestones, or are they nothing but packed earth? Once you know the capabilities of your builders, you'll be able to determine these details and more.

Race

The look of a fantasy city should reflect the values of its majority race to some degree. The suggestions below might offer some ideas that you can use in your city development.

Dwarves are likely to build thick-walled, sturdy buildings, and they prefer to delve down into subterranean levels for expansion rather than building tall towers. A predominantly dwarven city would be functional but still have its own stark beauty—a beauty derived primarily from the obvious skill used to craft it.

Elves, on the other hand, might live in a supremely aesthetic community—possibly even with the silver domes and white spires mentioned above. Alhough it would be every bit as well built as a dwarven city, elven builders might well put form before function, resulting in less practical but more stunning structures.

A city of halflings would have proportionally smaller buildings, which might not be built to last, since halflings enjoy travel and value their mobility.

A gnome city might resemble a dwarven community, except that less craftsmanship would be devoted to the buildings. City services such as water and sewer systems, on the other hand, might well be engineering marvels.

Predominantly human cities (as well as those with nearly equal mixtures of races in their populations) might be conglomerates of style, or they might have "neighborhoods" that reflect the tastes of certain races.

Layout

Most cities are built a bit at a time rather than all at once. Streets rarely fall into a neat grid; in most cases they meander through congested neighborhoods and around buildings that have sprung up. A city with all straight streets is a clear sign that someone (probably an extremely organized and powerful ruler) planned for the city's growth and laid out a pathway for that growth to occur. Such a situation isn't impossible, just unlikely—particularly since the planner probably would not live long enough to see all the plans come to fruition.

Districts

What cities lack in overall organization, they make up for in compartmentalization. Merchants set up shop where the customers are, and customers often prefer to do all their shopping in one place. Thus, many cities have a marketplace where the majority of the

businesses are concentrated. For similarly practical reasons, most people of the same economic level, race, or cultural background live close to each other, craftsmen cluster near their suppliers, and so on. Thus, any community larger than a village is not just a random jumble of homes, businesses, and workshops; it is divided into districts, wards, quarters, or some similar arrangement.

Such divisions might be unofficial—the result of happenstance. If this is the case, one district might bleed into another. For example, if the craftsmen's district abuts the market district, a few market stalls might be found among the craftsmen's workshops. Furthermore, some businesses might appear in multiple areas. Since dwarves tend to be excellent craftsmen, there might be a few crafthouses in the dwarven district, even though most are across town. The best place to buy bows might be in the elven quarter rather than in the market.

Divisions that are intentionally created, however, might be official and mandated. Thus, operating a bakery in the Stonemason's District might actually be illegal. Cities with districts delineated by ordinance are usually found only in the most orderly and lawful of societies, with heavy-handed authorities to enforce the rules. In such cities, the district boundaries are usually clearly marked.

Whether the divisions are harsh or murky, districts tend to become almost like independent small towns within a larger city. Each has a reputation, and many have rivalries with one another. Thus, characters might hear advice such as, "You won't find good ale in Midtown—you've got to go to the South Ward for that," or "Don't go into the Dives after nightfall." Authorities in the city might even treat the districts differently. Neighborhoods with wealthier residents or visitors almost certainly receive better upkeep and law enforcement. The city watch might toss a thief in jail for picking a pocket in one ward of the city and completely ignore the crime in another.

Don't neglect the differences in districts—it's important for adding flavor to a city. As the PCs learn these kinds of details, they will feel more at home in your city, and it will seem more real to them.

POSSIBLE DISTRICTS

You might find some or all of the following districts in a fantasy city. Large cities might also have multiples of some districts, such as the North Market, where there are lots of shops and vendors selling manufactured goods, and the South Market, where herds of animals or wagonloads of produce are bought and sold.

Marketplace (the Market, the Central Market)

Shipping (the Docks, the Warehouse Quarter)

Craftsmen (This district could be an all-encompassing Craftsmen's Ward or Guild District, or it might be further subdivided into sections such as the Leatherworker's Quarter and the Masons' Ward.)

Special Purposes (the Theater District, the Arena Ward, the Horseman's Quarter)

Mage (the Mage Quarter, Wizardhome, the Magic District, the Warded Ward)

Religious (This district could be a general Temple District, or there could be multiple such districts separated by specific religious differences, such as the Kordite District and the Pelor Quarter.)

Upperclass (the Nobles' Quarter, Hightown, the Silver District)

Middleclass (Midtown, the River Ward, the Central District)

Lowerclass (the Slums, the Dives, the Warrens, Nighttown)

Race (the Elven Retreat, the Gnome Burrows, the Halfling Quarter, the Dwarfgate District)

THE TOTAL LOOK

As you "build" your city, develop a clear picture in your mind of what its buildings and streets look like, based on all the above factors. Are the houses built of stone, wood, or both? Are the roofs made of wooden shingles or thatch? Are the streets wide or narrow? Do they wind about haphazardly, or did the whole city's layout follow some grand scheme? Are the roads clogged with herdsmen driving cattle to market, or are they elegant affairs lined with marble columns?

Whatever you decide, the appearance of the city should be as clear in your mind as possible when it's time for the PCs to pay it a visit. Take the time to describe the moss-covered rooftops and the dark stone walls of the buildings, or the red-brown, brick-covered streets and the shuttered windows, or whatever features you've so carefully designed. It's this kind of detail that will bring your city to life.

THE PEOPLE

A city is not just buildings; it is also people. The residents, both the powerful and the lowly, are the lifeblood of a city.

Those Who Hold the Power

Now it's time to consider which individuals and groups make up the power center of the community. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* offers plenty of suggestions for city authorities other than the ubiquitous "mayor who runs the town." For example, the city might be governed by a council, an official appointed by the king, a military figure, or a group of nobles. But there are other kinds of power centers as well.

A powerful wizards' guild, with many high-level members, might command so much respect and awe that it wields great political power in the city. Likewise, the high priests of the most popular (or only) religion in town might hold the reins of temporal as well as spiritual power. In general, high-level characters have so much measurable, observable might (not to mention such awe-inspiring reputations) that they almost certainly wield a fair bit of influence in government—assuming that they want such power.

An excellent way to add flair to a city is to place within its walls an organization that commands a great deal of influence and respect but does not actually rule. As mentioned in the last issue, such an organization might be an order of knighthood, or the masters of an ancient arcane secret, or even a powerful guild of craftsmen. Such a group gives the locals

something interesting to talk about when the PCs wander into the tavern: "What does the city council think of this issue, and what does the Order of Dayra think?" Such additional power centers also create interesting political issues and show that you've given the city a bit of extra thought.

Those Who Just Live There

To make your city come alive, you must give some thought to its common folk—although really, you already have. If you've decided that the city is a commerce center for local herdsmen and farmers, then you know that a lot of its people are herders and farmhands. And you know that there must also be laborers who unload the wagons, warehouse managers, slaughterhouse workers, and so on.

The main thing to consider about the common folk beyond who they are is how they are treated by the city authorities and the other powers that be. Consider the commoners' general level of wealth and freedom. In a poor or oppressed community, the common people wear tattered, dingy clothes and have dirty faces. Innkeepers aren't accustomed to tips, and there's no place to buy expensive jewelry. In a wealthier city, even the common folk wear nice, clean clothes and are generally happier. They also have more free time, so entertainment industries (such as theaters, arenas, dancehalls, and the like) are encouraged to form. Luxury services (such as messengers, bathhouses, town criers, porters, and so on) are readily available to those with a little extra coin. Thus, the lot of the commoner can change the whole feel of a city, and it can affect what the PCs can and cannot do there.

THE EFFECT OF MAGIC

Lastly, you must consider how magic affects your city, and how prevalent it is. Divine magic and arcane magic serve different functions in city life, though sometimes their areas of influence can overlap. Some low-level spells would logically be in common use, so methods must exist to counteract them.

Clerics can cast spells that cure disease, create food, heal wounds, and even bring back the dead. If individuals of such power live and work within a city, it stands to reason that they can improve people's lives. Are there diseased beggars in the street? Probably not. Do the poor go hungry? That depends on the number of clerics and the number of poor people, but your city might have enough of the former to eradicate starvation. Divine magic can affect the city as a whole, so consider the amount of influence you want it to have carefully.

Do the local authorities employ spellcasters to help with special problems? A wizard or sorcerer would be handy when dealing with a marauding monster, or even a breach in the wall. How do the authorities deal with criminals who have access to magic? Since *invisibility* is only a 2nd-level spell, invisible thieves are probably quite common, and the constabulary should have some means of detecting them. Hiring plenty of sorcerers who can cast *see invisibility* is one good method, but the authorities could also equip guards with devices that would serve the same purpose.

Are certain spells illegal within the city? It would make sense for a city government to outlaw any spell that spreads fire or disease, two of a city's worst enemies. Likewise, authorities might forbid any spell that animates the dead—with so many people and so many dead, such spells are bound to cause trouble. The powers that be might also frown on charm and compulsion spells, since magic that affects people's minds tends to be bad for business.

The issue of how magic affects society and the world in general is worthy of an entire article, and it might eventually become one. But in terms of cities, keep in mind that magic can both cause and solve many of the problems that face a large community. There are no right or wrong answers, but the decision you make about this one issue will have a profound effect on the city you create.

PART 3

Next issue, we'll discuss setting an entire adventure in a city and put some of the material developed here to good use.

PEOPLE IN TOWN

What if a PC goes up to someone on the street and asks a question? You have to be able to come up with who this person is and what he or she does in town—in a hurry. Here's a short list of people the PCs might meet in a city. It's by no means a complete list; it's just meant to get you started.

- An alchemist
- An apprentice
- An artist
- A barber
- A beggar
- A cattleherd
- A cobbler (someone who repairs shoes)
- A constable
- A cooper (someone who makes wooden vessels such as barrels)
- A cordwainer (someone who makes shoes)
- A dyer (someone who dyes cloth)
- An entertainer (a dancer, a singer, a clown, or a mime)
- A fisherman
- A fishmonger
- A fletcher (someone who makes arrows)
- A glassblower
- A groom
- A guardsman
- An innkeeper
- A jeweler
- A laborer
- A leatherworker
- A maid
- A mercenary
- A midwife (someone who delivers babies)
- A noble
- A pawnbroker
- A peddler (with cart)
- A physician
- A pilgrim
- A prefect (a government official)
- A priest
- A prostitute
- A scholar
- A shepherd
- A skald (poet/minstrel)
- A swineherd
- A tailor
- A thief
- A usurer (someone who loans money)
- A vintner (someone who makes wine)
- A weaver

Sage Advice

Questions and Answers

by Skip Williams

This month the Sage considers the ins and outs of magic and combat in the D&D game.

I know a spellcaster can't deliver a touch spell with a weapon, but can a spellcaster deliver a touch spell by touching an opponent's weapon? For example, suppose an enemy fighter has a weapon with a 10-foot reach. Can a spellcaster step into the area that fighter threatens and touch the weapon to affect the wielder? Is there a limit on how far a touch spell can travel through equipment?

For the purposes of most magical effects, touching a creature's equipment is exactly the same as touching the creature. That's why touch attacks ignore armor, natural armor, and shields. The point of contact does have to be fairly close to the target's body, though.

There is no set limit to how far away a spellcaster can be when delivering a touch spell, but the basic requirement is being able to reach into the space the creature occupies. For example, a human occupies a 5-foot space. Thus, a foe must be able to reach into that space to deliver a touch attack, even if a piece of the human's equipment (such as 50 feet of dangling rope or a manufactured reach weapon) sticks out of the space.

A creature with natural reach is an exception to this rule—you can use a touch spell against such a creature by touching one of its natural reach weapons, even if its body is out of your reach. Such a tactic might require some preparation, however. If a creature can reach you with a natural weapon (such as a bite, claw, or tentacle), you can ready an action to use a touch spell against that natural weapon when it is used to make a melee attack against you. Though casting a spell usually requires a standard action, you can cast the spell and try to touch the target as your readied action, so long as the spell's casting time is 1 action or less. (This is just like casting a spell and making a touch attack as part of your regular action.) If the spell has a longer casting time, you must first cast it and then hold the charge until it can be delivered to pull off this maneuver.

How often can a tiger use its rake attack? Suppose it hits with its first claw attack. It can then make two rake attacks, right? Can it make two more rake attacks if it gets a hold with its other claw? And then two more rake attacks if it gets a hold with its bite? Or can rake attacks be used only in the first round?

A tiger, leopard, or lion must either pounce on or grapple a foe (usually through its improved grab ability) before it can rake.

If the animal pounces, it makes five melee attacks the same round: claw/claw/bite/rake/rake. If it grabs, it must establish a hold before it can rake. (Most big cats can use the improved grab ability only with their bite attacks, not with their claws. The tiger, which is bigger and nastier than most big cats, can use either its bite or its claws. It is possible for a lion or leopard to grab and hold prey with its claws as well, but it must use the regular grappling rules to do so.) The animal can rake twice if it establishes a hold, regardless of whether or not it used improved grab to do so. If it begins its turn with an opponent in its grasp, it can also rake twice. In any case, the animal gets only two rake attacks per round, no matter how many times it manages to maintain or establish a hold during that round.

When casting a *lightning bolt* spell at a group of characters who are more or less standing in a line (one behind the other), does the bolt continue through the first character and on through those behind, dealing damage until it reaches the end of its range? Or does the first character in the line act as an interposing barrier that stops the bolt? In other words, can you affect only creatures that are side by side (or staggered behind each other) within the spell's 5- or 10-foot width, or can the bolt travel through creatures and continue? What about other effects described as "lines," such as black dragon breath? Also, does an object (such as a table) cause the effect to stop, or does it continue on to its maximum range?

Any spell or supernatural ability described as a line affects everything in its area, so long as the spell's line of effect is not blocked.

Objects block line of effect for most spells and supernatural abilities, though some of these (such as *detect magic*) can penetrate barriers and others (such as *teleport*) ignore barriers. Line of effect remains unblocked if there is at least 1 square foot of open space per 25 square feet of barrier (5-foot-by-5-foot section). For example, a closed door, 5 feet wide and 8 feet high, with no

openings other than a keyhole, blocks line of effect. Replace the door with a set of bars or a fishnet, and line of effect is no longer blocked. A small object, such as an overturned table, won't block line of effect unless it is at least 5 feet high and 5 feet wide. If it's smaller than that, there's enough space around the edges to let magical effects pass right by. (Such an object can still provide cover, though).

A creature generally doesn't block line of effect because it almost always leaves the requisite 1 square foot of open space per 5-foot-square area it happens to occupy. A *lightning bolt* spell or a black dragon's breath weapon can rip through any number of such creatures standing one behind the other in a line, to the limit of the effect's range. For example, a *lightning bolt* spell cast at 10th level can create a line 5 feet wide and 200 feet long. Forty Medium-size creatures could stand single-file in an area that size, and a bolt with those dimensions would affect them all. Furthermore, the creatures at the front of such a line do not provide cover against the effect to the creatures behind them.

Some creatures, however, can completely block off the requisite amount of area. For example, a gelatinous cube can completely fill a corridor that's 10 feet square. If it does so, it blocks line of effect for all spells. A creature that is significantly bigger than a spell's area also can block line of effect. For example, a spell with a line- or cone-shaped area could be blocked by a colossal dragon standing near the spell's point of origin—sometimes there's just no way to aim a 5-foot-wide stroke of lightning so that it can get past a really big body.

Always check the description of a spell or special ability before deciding whether the effect can pass through multiple creatures. For example, spells such as *ray of enfeeblement* and *disintegrate* are effect spells, not area spells. Each of these spells creates a ray, and a ray can affect only one target.

If a barbarian became undead (by gaining the vampire template, for example), how would you determine how long his rage lasts? He no longer has a Constitution score. Could an undead barbarian theoretically rage until all opponents were defeated or someone managed to take him down? Does this Constitution "boost" have any other effects on the undead barbarian? Does he actually lose hit points?

An undead creature uses its Charisma modifier wherever its Constitution modifier would normally apply (except Fortitude saving throws, for which the creature must use its +0 Constitution modifier if it needs to make a Fortitude save at all). Thus, the example barbarian rages for a number of rounds equal to 3 + his Charisma modifier (but always for at least 1 round).

An undead creature has no Constitution score at all and cannot gain one by receiving a bonus. Therefore, the +4 Constitution bonus from rage has no effect on this barbarian.

If I cast a *shadow evocation* spell and duplicate a *wall of force*, do I get all the effects of a *wall of force*? I think so, because *shadow evocation* creates all the effects of the spell, including touch, sight, sound, and so forth. Would the *shadow wall of force* prevent creatures from passing through it? The wall is invisible, but it can be touched. As the caster, I disbelieve my own spells, so could I cast spells through the *shadow wall of force*?

You cannot duplicate a *wall of force* spell with the *shadow evocation* spell, but you could do so with the *greater shadow evocation* spell.

A shadow *wall of force* is partially real and remains in place whether it is seen or not. Creatures that fail to disbelieve the wall cannot pass through it. Their spells do not have line of effect, and ranged or melee attacks bounce off the wall.

To receive a save to disbelieve the wall, a creature must interact with it somehow—by touching it, trying to fire an arrow through it, or attempting to cast a spell through it. The spell description states that nondamaging effects are only 40% likely to work against those who recognize that the effect is illusory. Thus, a creature that successfully disbelieves the wall is blocked in 40% of its attempts to pass through it, spells cast by the creature fail to have line of effect 40% of the time, and ranged or melee attacks are blocked 40% of the time.

Although you do indeed disbelieve the shadow effects you create, the *wall of force* is still partially real to you. Therefore, your movement, spells, and ranged or melee attacks are also blocked 40% of the time.

How does the *searing light* spell function against an incorporeal creature such as a spectre? The spell description says it produces a ray of holy power, like a ray of the sun. Does this ray have a miss chance when used against a spectre? Also, a spectre has a special quality that makes it powerless in sunlight. Does this mean it takes extra damage from the *searing light* spell?

Whenever a corporeal caster uses a spell on an incorporeal creature such as a spectre, there is a 50% chance that the spell has no effect. Spells with the force descriptor have no miss chance, but any other spell does unless its description specifically says otherwise. *Searing light* is not a force spell, and though its spell description has some expressive language about its effect, it does not specifically state that the spell ignores the incorporeal miss chance.

If a *searing light* spell actually works on a spectre, it inflicts 1d8 points of damage per caster level (maximum 10d8). In general, if a creature's description mentions any sort of detrimental effect from sunlight, that creature is "particularly vulnerable" to sunlight and takes the higher amount of damage amount from a *searing light* spell. Since spectres are powerless in sunlight, they qualify.

It's also worth noting that the powerlessness effect of actual sunlight has no miss chance against incorporeal undead. That is, a spectre that goes out in the sun automatically becomes powerless.

If a rogue were blinded, stunned, or suffering any other physical problem that would normally cause her to lose her Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, would her uncanny dodge ability still

allow her to keep that bonus? I'm basically wondering what conditions can cause you to lose the benefits of uncanny dodge.

Uncanny dodge allows you to keep your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class when flat-footed or struck by an invisible attacker. It doesn't help you if you're immobilized. Here's a quick summary of the relevant conditions:

Blinded: When you're blinded, all your opponents are effectively invisible to you. If you have uncanny dodge, you retain your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class when blinded, but you still suffer all the other effects of blindness.

Cowering: This condition leaves you frozen in fear, which means you're immobile. Therefore you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, even if you have uncanny dodge.

Flat-Footed: Uncanny dodge allows you to retain your dexterity bonus.

Grappled: When you're grappled, you're immobile, so you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, even if you have uncanny dodge.

Held: You're helpless and therefore immobile. Uncanny dodge doesn't alleviate this condition or its effects.

Helpless: When you're helpless, you're immobile, so you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, even if you have uncanny dodge.

Incapacitated: You're helpless and therefore immobile. Uncanny dodge doesn't alleviate this condition or its effects.

Pinned: When you're pinned, you're also grappled (and therefore immobile), so you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, even if you have uncanny dodge.

Stunned: This condition leaves you unable to act. You're immobile when stunned, so you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, even if you have uncanny dodge.

Does the armor you wear change your encumbrance? I seem to remember reading somewhere that it does not, but my friends all think otherwise.

The *D&D Conversion Guide,* which is still available as a download from the Wizards of the Coast website, says that armor does not contribute to encumbrance, but that is incorrect. (It probably was correct when the *Conversion Guide* was written, but the rules changed a bit after its release.) You'll find the actual rule in Chapter 9 in the *Player's Handbook* (page 141). It says that all the weight a character carries (including the weight of any armor worn) affects encumbrance. For a character wearing armor, use either the encumbrance category that the armor imposes, or the one that the total weight carried imposes, whichever is worse.

For example, suppose a human with a Strength score of 18 wears a breastplate (30 pounds) and also carries 25 pounds of weapons and miscellaneous gear, for a total load of 55 pounds. A Medium-size character with a Strength score of 18 can carry up to 100 pounds and still be only lightly loaded, but a breastplate is medium armor, so the character has a medium load. However, the character can pick up an additional 145 pounds of stuff and still have only a medium load.

Suppose Gruntharg the barbarian carries a longspear and wears spiked gauntlets. He has a throwing axe at his belt. He encounters two orcs 60 feet away and wins initiative. For his action, Gruntharg draws the axe and moves, and also readies an action to throw the axe at any orc that comes within 15 feet. The orcs charge. As soon as the first orc gets within 15 feet, Gruntharg throws the axe and kills that orc. After throwing the axe, is Gruntharg assumed to be carrying and wielding the longspear in both hands? Thus, does he get an attack of opportunity as the surviving orc passes from 10 feet away from him to 5 feet away? (Gruntharg does not possess the Monkey Grip feat from *Sword and Fist.*) If not, what are the rules for going from a one-handed (or carrying) grip to a two-handed grip for a weapon, and what kind of action is it to change this grip? Now suppose Gruntharg has the longspear in both hands when a spellcaster 5 feet away from him starts casting a spell. The longspear does not threaten the spellcaster because it's a reach weapon and the spellcaster is too close. Can Gruntharg just let go of the longspear and smack the spellcaster with his spiked gauntlet? What kind of action is it to let go of a two-handed weapon with only one hand?

Gruntharg's action in the first example (throwing the readied axe) is possible. Presumably, Gruntharg holds the longspear in one hand, perhaps letting the shaft rest on his shoulder, or perhaps just letting the butt drag on the ground. This arrangement leaves one hand free to draw the throwing axe while moving, which Gruntharg can manage because he has at least a +1 base attack bonus. (Even a 1st-level barbarian has a +1 base attack bonus.) As a general rule, if you're big enough to wield a weapon in two hands, you can just carry it (somehow) with one hand.

The second example (an opportunity attack against the second orc) is not possible. Holding a two-handed weapon is not the same as wielding the weapon. If Gruntharg wants to use that longspear he's been holding on his shoulder or dragging on the ground, he has to get his free hand on it. This maneuver is similar to drawing the weapon, but a little easier, since Gruntharg already has one hand on it. Therefore, it's a free action. But Gruntharg can do this only during his own turn, and in any case, he does not threaten an area with the longspear when he's holding it in only one hand.

The third example (smacking the spellcaster with the gauntlet) is not possible as described. A spiked gauntlet is a melee weapon, and Gruntharg threatens the area around him with it, but only when he has that hand free. In the example, Gruntharg is holding the longspear with that hand, not wielding the gauntlet. He could indeed just let go of the longspear with one hand; this maneuver is the equivalent of dropping the weapon, even though he is still holding onto it with the other hand. Dropping a weapon is a free action, but you can use free actions only on your own turn. Gruntharg could shift the spear to one hand as a free action at the end of his turn, leaving one hand free to threaten the area around him with the spiked gauntlet, but then he would not threaten any area with the longspear.

Email your questions to **tsrsage@aol.com**

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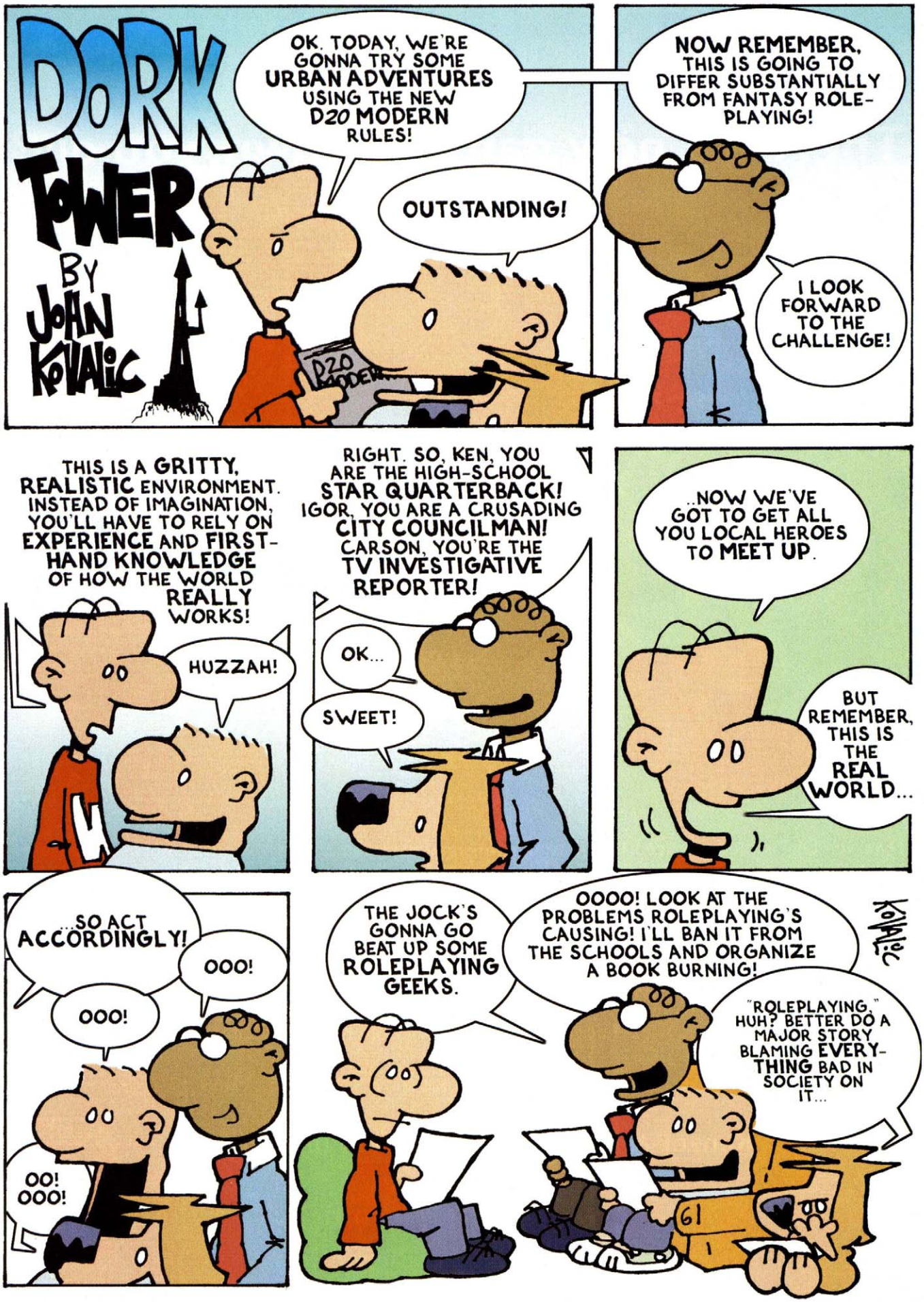
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THE ARMS OF THE KRAKEN

THE PROPHET

Aeron Damphair was drowning men on Great Wyk when they came to tell him that the king was dead.

It was a bleak cold morning, and the sea was as leaden as the sky. The first three men had offered their lives to the Drowned God fearlessly, but the fourth was weak in faith, and began to struggle as his lungs cried out for air. Standing waist deep in the surf, Aeron seized the naked boy by the shoulders and pushed his head back down as he tried to snatch a breath. "Have courage," he said. "We came from the sea, and to the sea we must return. Open your mouth and drink deep of god's blessing. Fill your lungs with water, that you may die and be reborn. It does no good to fight."

Either the boy could not hear him with his head beneath the waves, or else his faith had utterly deserted him. He began to kick and thrash so wildly that Aeron had to call for help. Four of his drowned men waded out to seize the wretch and hold him under water. "Lord God who drowned for us," the priest prayed, in a voice as deep as the sea, "let Emmond your servant be reborn from the sea, as you were. Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel."

Finally it was done. No more air was bubbling from his mouth, and all the strength had gone out of his limbs. Face down in the shallow sea floated Emmond, pale and cold and peaceful.

That was when the Damphair realized that three horsemen had joined his drowned men on the pebbled shore. Aeron knew The Sparr, a hatchet-faced old man with watery eyes whose quavery voice was law on this part of Great Wyk. His son Steffarion accompanied him, with another youth whose dark red fur-lined cloak was pinned at the shoulder with a ornate brooch that showed the black-and-gold warhorn of the Goodbrothers. *One of Gorold's sons,* the priest decided at a glance. Three tall sons had been born to Goodbrother's wife late in life, after a dozen daughters, and it was said that no man could tell one son from the others. Aeron Damphair did not deign to try. Whether this be Greydon or Gormond or Gran, the priest had no time for him.

He growled a brusque command, and his drowned men seized the dead boy by his arms and legs to carry him above the tideline. The priest followed, naked but for a sealskin clout that covered his private parts. Goosefleshed and dripping he splashed back onto land, across cold wet sand and sea-scoured pebbles. One of his drowned men handed him a robe of heavy roughspun dyed in mottled greens and blues and greys, the colors of the sea and the Drowned God. Aeron donned the robe and pulled his hair free. Black and wet, that hair; no blade had touched it since the sea had raised him up. It draped his shoulders like a ragged, ropy cloak, and fell down past his waist. Aeron wove strands of seaweed through it, and through his tangled, uncut beard.

His drowned men formed a circle around the dead boy, praying. Norjen worked his arms whilst Rus knelt astride him, pumping on his chest, but all moved aside for Aeron. He pried apart the boy's cold lips with his fingers, and gave Emmond the kiss of life, and again, and again, until the sea came gushing from his mouth. The boy began to cough and spit, and his eyes blinked open, full of fear.

Another one returned. It was a sign of the Drowned God's favor, men said. Every other priest lost a man from time to time, even Tarle the Thrice-Drowned, who had once been thought so holy that he was picked to crown a king. But never Aeron Greyjoy. He was the Damphair, who had seen the god's own watery halls and returned to tell of it. "Rise," he told the sputtering boy, as he slapped him on his naked back. "You have drowned and been returned to us. What is dead can never die."

"But rises." The boy coughed violently, bringing up more water. "Rises

again." Every word was bought with pain, but that was the way of the world; a man must fight to live. "Rises again." Emmond staggered to his feet. "Harder. And stronger."

"You belong to the god now," Aeron told him. The other drowned men gathered round, and gave him each a punch and a kiss to welcome him to brotherhood. One helped him don a roughspun robe of mottled blue and green and grey. Another presented him with a driftwood cudgel. "You belong to the sea now, so the sea has armed you," Aeron said. "We pray that you shall wield your cudgel fiercely, against all the enemies of our god."

Only then did the priest turn to the three riders, watching from their saddles. "Have you come to be drowned, my lords?"

The Sparr coughed. "I was drowned as a boy," he said, "and my son upon his name day."

Aeron snorted. That Steffarion Sparr had been given to the Drowned God soon after birth he had no doubt. He knew the manner of it too, a quick dip into a tub of seawater that scarce wet the infant's head. Small wonder the ironborn had been conquered, they who once held sway everywhere the sound of waves was heard. "That is no true drowning," he told the riders. "He that does not die in truth cannot hope to rise from death. Why have you come, if not to prove your faith?"

"Lord Gorold's son came seeking you, with news." The Sparr indicated the youth in the red cloak.

The boy looked to be no more than six-and-ten. "Aye, and which are you?" Aeron demanded.

"Gormond. Gormond Goodbrother, if it please my lord."

"It is the Drowned God we must please. Have you been drowned, Gormond Goodbrother?"

"On my name day, Damphair. My father sent me to find you and bring you to him. He needs to see you."

"Here I stand. Let Lord Gorold come and feast his eyes." Aeron took a leather skin from Rus, freshly filled with water from the sea. The priest pulled out the cork and took a swallow.

"I am to bring you to the keep," insisted young Gormond, from atop his horse.

He is afraid to dismount, lest he get his boots wet. "I have the god's work to do." Aeron Greyjoy was a prophet. He did not suffer petty lords ordering him about like some thrall.

"Gorold's had a bird," said The Sparr.

"A maester's bird, from Pyke," Gormond confirmed.

Every word was bought with pain, but that was the way of the world; a man must **fight to live.**

Dark wings, dark words. "The ravens fly o'er salt and stone. If there are tidings that concern me, speak them now."

"Such tidings as we bear are for your ears alone, Damphair," The Sparr said. "These are not matters I would speak of here before these others."

"*These others* are my drowned men, god's servants, just as I am. I have no secrets from them, nor from our god beside whose holy sea I stand."

The horsemen exchanged a look. "Tell him," said The Sparr, and the youth in the red cloak summoned up his courage. "The king is dead," he said, as plain as that. Four small words, yet the sea itself trembled when he uttered them.

Four kings there were in Westeros, yet Aeron did not need to ask which one was meant. Balon Greyjoy ruled the Iron Islands, and no other. *The king is dead. How can that be?* Aeron had seen his eldest brother not a moon's turn past, when he had returned to the Iron Islands from harrying the Stony Store. Balon's grey hair had gone half white whilst the priest had been away, and the stoop in his shoulders was more pronounced than when the longships sailed. Yet all in all the king had not seemed ill.

Aeron Greyjoy had built his life upon two mighty pillars. Those four small words had knocked one down. *Only the Drowned God remains to me. May he make me as strong and tireless as the sea.* "Tell me the manner of my brother's death."

"His Grace was crossing a bridge at Pyke when he fell, and was dashed upon the rocks below."

The Greyjoy stronghold stood upon a broken headland, its keeps and towers built atop massive stone stacks that thrust up from the sea. Bridges knotted Pyke together; arched bridges of carved stone, and swaying spans of hempen rope and wooden planks. "Was the storm raging when he fell?" Aeron demanded of them.

"Aye," the youth said, "it was."

"The Storm God cast him down," the priest announced. For a thousand thousand years sea and sky had been at war. From the sea had come the ironborn, and the fish that sustained them even in the depths of winter, but storms brought only woe and grief. "My brother Balon made us great again, which earned the Storm God's wrath. He feasts now in the Drowned God's watery halls, with mermaids to attend his every want. It shall be for us who remain behind in this dry and dismal vale to finish his great work." He pushed the cork back into his waterskin. "I shall speak with your lord father. How far from here to Hammerhorn?"

"Six leagues. You may ride pillion with me."

"One can ride faster than two. Give me your horse, and the Drowned God will bless you."

"Take my horse, Damphair," offered Steffarion Sparr.

"No. His mount is stronger. Your horse, boy."

The youth hesitated half a heartbeat, then dismounted and held the reins for Damphair. Aeron shoved a bare black foot into a stirrup and swung himself onto the saddle. He was not fond of horses—they were creatures from the green lands, and helped to make men weak—but necessity required that he ride. *Dark wings, dark words.* A storm was brewing, he could hear it in the waves and storms brought naught but evil. "Meet with me at Pebbleton beneath Lord Merlyn's tower," he told his drowned men, as he turned the horse's head.

The way was rough, up hills and woods and stony defiles along a narrow track that oft seemed to disappear beneath the horse's hooves. Great Wyk was the largest of the Iron Islands, so vast that some of its lords had holdings that did not front upon the holy sea.

Gorold Goodbrother was one such. His keep was in the Hardstone Hills, as far as from the Drowned God's realm as any place in the isles. Gorold's folk toiled down in Gorold's mines, in the stony dark beneath the earth. Some lived and died without setting eyes upon salt water. *Small wonder that such folk are crabbed and queer.*

As Aeron rode, his thoughts turned to his brothers.

Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, the Lord of the Iron Islands. Harlon, Quenton, and Donel had been born of Lord Quellon's first wife, a woman of the Stonetrees. Balon, Euron, Victarion, Urrigon, and Aeron were the sons of his second, a Sunderly of Saltcliffe. For a third wife Quellon took a girl from the green lands, who gave him a sickly idiot boy named Robin, the brother best forgotten. The priest had no memory of Quenton or Donel, who had died as infants. Harlon he recalled but dimly, sitting grey-faced and still in a windowless tower room and speaking in whispers that grew fainter every day as the greyscale turned his tongue and lips to stone. *One day we shall feast on fish together in the Drowned God's watery halls, the four of us and Urri too.*

Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, but only four had lived to manhood. That was the way of this cold world, where men fished the sea and dug in the ground and died, whilst women brought forth short-lived children from beds of blood and pain. Aeron had been the last and least of the four krakens, Balon the eldest and boldest, a fierce and fearless boy who lived only to restore the ironborn to their ancient glory. At ten he scaled the Flint Cliffs to the Blind Lord's haunted tower. At thirteen he could run a longship's oars and dance the finger dance as well as any man in the isles. At fifteen he had sailed with Dagmer Cleftjaw to the Stepstones and spent a summer reaving. He slew his first man there, and took his first two salt wives. At seventeen Balon captained his own ship. He was all that an elder brother ought to be, though he had never shown Aeron aught but scorn. *I was weak and full of sin, and scorn was more than I deserved. Better to be scorned by Balon the Brave than beloved of Euron Crow's Eye.* And if age and grief had turned Balon bitter with the years, they had also made him more determined than any man alive. *He was born a lord's son and died a king, murdered by a jealous god,* Aeron thought, *and now the storm is coming, a storm such as these isles have never known.*

It was long after dark by the time the priest espied the spiky iron battlements of the Hammerhorn clawing at the crescent moon. Gorold's keep was hulking and blocky, its great stones quarried from the cliff that loomed behind it. Below its walls the entrances of caves and ancient mines yawned like toothless black mouths. The Hammerhorn's iron gates had been closed and barred for the night. Aeron beat on them with a rock, until the clanging woke a guard.

The youth who admitted him was the image of Gormond, whose horse he'd taken. "Which one are you?" Aeron demanded.

"Gran. My father awaits you within"

The hall was dank and drafty, full of shadows. One of Gorold's daughters offered the priest a horn of ale. Another poked at a sullen fire that was giving off more smoke than heat. Gorold Goodbrother himself was talking quietly with a slim man in fine grey robes, who wore about his neck a chain of many metals that marked him for a maester of the Citadel.

"Where is Gormond?" Gorold asked when he saw Aeron.

"He returns afoot. Send your women away, my lord. And the maester as well." He had no love of maesters. Their ravens were creatures of the Storm God, and he did not trust their healing, not since Urri. *No proper man would choose a life of thralldom, nor forge a chain of servitude to wear about his throat.*

"Gysella, Gwin, leave us," Goodbrother said curtly. "You as well, Gran. Maester Murenmure will stay."

"He will go," insisted Aeron.

"This is my hall, Damphair. It is not for you to say who must go and who remains. The maester stays."

The man lives too far from the sea, Aeron told himself. "Then I shall go," he told Goodbrother. Dry rushes rustled underneath the cracked soles of his bare black feet as he turned and stalked away. It seemed he had ridden a long way for naught.

Aeron was almost at the door when the maester cleared his throat and said, "Euron Crow's Eye sits the Seastone Chair."

The Damphair turned. The hall had suddenly grown colder. *The Crow's Eye is half a world away. Balon sent him off two years ago, and swore that it would be his life if he returned.* "Tell me," he said hoarsely.

"He sailed into Lordsport the day after the king's death, and claimed the castle and the crown as Balon's eldest brother," said Gorold Goodbrother. "Now he sends forth ravens, summoning the captains and the kings from every isle to Pyke, to bend their knees and do him homage as their king."

No proper man would choose a life of thralldom, nor forge a chain of servitude to wear about his throat.

"No." Aeron Damphair did not weigh his words. "Only a godly man may sit the Seastone Chair. The Crow's Eye worships naught but his own pride."

"You were on Pyke not long ago, and saw the king," said Goodbrother. "Did Balon say aught to you of the succession?"

Aye. They had spoken in the Sea Tower, as the wind howled outside the windows and the waves crashed restlessly below. Balon had shaken his head in despair when he heard what Aeron had to tell him of his last remaining son. "The wolves have made a weakling of him, as I feared," the king said. "I pray god that they killed him, so he cannot stand in Asha's way." That was Balon's blindess; he saw himself in his wild, headstrong daughter and believed she could succeed him. He was wrong in that, and Aeron tried to tell him so. "No woman will ever rule the ironborn, not even a woman such as Asha," he insisted, but Balon could be deaf to things he did not wish to hear.

Before the priest could answer Gorold Goodbrother, the maester's

mouth flapped open once again. "By rights the Seastone Chair belongs to Theon, or Asha if the prince is dead. That is the law."

"Green land law," said Aeron with contempt. "What is that to us? We are ironborn, the sons of the sea, chosen of the Drowned God. No woman may rule over us, nor any godless man."

"And Victarion?" asked Gorold Goodbrother. "He has the Iron Fleet. Will Victarion make a claim, Damphair?"

"Euron is the elder brother . . ." began the maester.

Aeron silenced him with a look. In little fishing towns and great stone keeps alike such a look from Damphair would make maids feel faint and send children shrieking to their mothers, and it was more than sufficient to quell the chain-neck thrall. "Euron is elder," the priest said, "but Victarion is more godly."

"Will it come to war between them?" asked the maester.

"Ironborn must not spill the blood of ironborn."

"A pious sentiment, Damphair," said Goodbrother, "but not one that your brother shares. He had Sawane Botley drowned for saying that the Seastone Chair by rights belonged to Theon."

"If he was drowned, no blood was shed," said Aeron.

The maester and the lord exchanged a look. "I must send word to Pyke, and soon," said Gorold Goodbrother. "Damphair, I would have your counsel. What shall it be, homage or defiance"

Aeron tugged his beard, and thought. *I have seen the storm, and its name is Euron Crow's Eye.* "For now, send only silence," he told the lord. "I must pray on this."

"Pray all you wish," the maester said, "it does not change the law. Theon is the rightful heir, and Asha next."

"Silence!" Aeron roared. "Too long have the ironborn listened to you chain-neck maesters prating of the green lands and their laws. It is time we listened to the sea again. It is time we listened to the voice of god." His own voice rang in that smoky hall, so full of power than neither Gorold Goodbrother nor his maester dared a reply. *The Drowned God is with me,* Aeron thought. *He has shown me the way.*

Goodbrother offered him the comforts of the castle for the night, but the priest declined. He seldom slept beneath a castle roof, and never so far from the sea. "Comforts I shall know, in the Drowned God's watery halls beneath the waves. We are born to suffer, that our sufferings might make us strong. All that I require is a fresh horse to carry me to Pebbleton."

That Goodbrother was pleased to provide. He sent his son Greydon as well, to show the priest the shortest way through the hills down to the sea. Dawn was still an hour off when they set forth, but their mounts were hardy and sure-footed, and they made good time despite the darkness. Aeron closed his eyes and said a silent prayer, and after a while began to drowse in the saddle

The sound came softly, the scream of a rusted hinge. "Urri," he muttered, and woke, fearful. *There is no hinge here, no door, no Urri.* A flying axe took off half of Urri's hand when he was ten-and-four, playing at the finger dance whilst his father and his elder brothers were away at war. Lord Quellon's third wife had been a Piper of Pinkmaiden Castle, a girl with big soft breasts and brown doe's eyes. Instead of healing Urri's hand the Old Way, with fire and seawater, she gave him to her green land maester, who swore that he could sew back the missing fingers. He did that, and later he used potions and poltices and herbs, but the hand mortified and Urri took a fever. By the time the maester sawed his arm off, it was too late.

Lord Quellon never returned from his last voyage; the Drowned God in his goodness granted him a death at sea. It was Lord Balon who came back, with his brothers Euron and Victarion. When Balon heard what had befallen Urri, he removed three of the maester's fingers with a cook's cleaver and sent his father's Piper wife to sew them back on. Poltices and potions worked as well for the maester as they had for Urrigon. He died raving, and Lord Quellon's third wife followed soon thereafter, as the midwife drew a stillborn daughter from her womb. Aeron had been glad. It had been his axe that sheared off Urri's hand, whilst they danced the finger dance together as friends and brothers will.

It shamed him still to recall the years that followed Urri's death. At six-and-ten he called himself a man, but in truth he had been a sack of wine with legs. He would sing, he would dance (but not the finger dance, never again), he would jape and jabber and make mock. He played the pipes, he juggled, he rode horses, and could drink more than all the Wynches and the Botleys, and half the Harlaws too. The Drowned God gives every man a gift, even him; no man could piss longer or farther than Aeron Greyjoy, as he proved at every feast. Once he bet his new longship against a herd of goats that he could quench a hearthfire with no more than his cock. Aeron feasted on goat for a year, and named the longship *Golden Storm,* though Balon threatened to hang him from her mast when he heard what sort of ram his brother proposed to mount upon her prow.

In the end the *Golden Storm* went down off Fair Isle during Balon's first rebellion, cut in half by a towering war galley called *Fury* when Stannis Baratheon caught Victarion in his trap and smashed the Iron Fleet. Yet the god was not done with Aeron, and carried him to shore. Some fishermen took him captive and marched him down to Lannisport in chains, and he spent the rest of the war in the bowels of Casterly Rock, proving that krakens can piss further and longer than lions, boars, or chickens.

That man is dead. Aeron had drowned and been reborn from the sea, the god's own prophet. No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could . . . nor memories, the bones of the soul. *The sound of a door opening, the scream of a rusted iron hinge. Euron has come again.* It did not matter. He was the Damphair priest, beloved of the god.

"Will it come to war?" asked Greydon Goodbrother as the sun was lightening the hills. "A war of brother against brother?"

No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could . . . nor memories, **the bones of the soul.**

"If the Drowned God wills it. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair." *The Crow's Eye will fight, that is certain.* No woman could defeat him, not even Asha; women were made to fight their battles in the birthing bed. And Theon, if he lived, was just as hopeless, a boy of sulks and smiles. At Winterfell he proved his worth, such that it was, but the Crow's Eye was no crippled boy. The decks of Euron's ship were painted red, to better hide the blood that soaked them. *Victarion. The king must be Victarion, or the storm will slay us all.*

Greydon left him when the sun was up, to bring the news of Balon's death to his cousins in their towers at Downdelving, Crow Spike Keep, and Corpse Lake. Aeron continued on alone, up hills and down vales along a stony track that grew wider and more travelled as he neared the sea. In every village he paused to preach, and in the yards of petty lords as well. "We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return," he told them. His voice was as deep as the ocean, and thundered like the waves. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, and now he feasts beneath the waves in the Drowned God's watery halls." He raised his hands. *"Balon is dead! The king is dead!* Yet a king will come again! For what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger! *A king will rise!"*

Some of those who heard him threw down their hoes and picks to follow, so by the time he heard the crash of waves a dozen men walked behind his horse, touched by god and desirous of drowning.

Pebbleton was home to several thousand fisherfolk whose hovels huddled round the base of a square towerhouse with a turret at each corner. Two score of Aeron's drowned men there awaited him, camped along a grey sand beach in sealskin tents and shelters built of driftwood. Their hands were roughened by brine, scarred by nets and lines, calused from oars and picks and axes, but now those hands gripped driftwood cudgels hard as iron, for the god had armed them from his arsenal beneath the sea.

They had built a shelter for the priest just above the tideline. Gladly he crawled into it, after he had drowned his newest followers. *My god,* he prayed, *speak to me in the rumble of the waves, and tell me what to do. The captains and the kings await your word. Who shall be our king in Balon's place? Sing to me in the language of leviathan, that I may know his name. Tell me, oh lord beneath the waves, who has the strength to fight the storm on Pyke?*

Though his ride to Hammerhorn had left him weary, Aeron Damphair was restless in his driftwood shelter, roofed over with black weeds from the sea. The clouds rolled in to cloak the moon and stars, and the darkness lay as thick upon the sea as it did upon his soul. *Balon favored Asha, the child of his body, but a woman cannot rule the ironborn. It must be Victarion.* Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, and Victarion was the strongest of them, a bull of a man, fearless and dutiful. *And therein lies our danger.* A younger brother owes obedience to an elder, and Victarion was not a man to sail against tradition. *He has no love for Euron, though. Not since the woman died.*

Outside, beneath the snoring of his drowned men and the keening of the wind, he could hear the pounding of the waves, the hammer of his god calling him to battle. Aeron crept from his little shelter into the chill of the night. Naked he stood, pale and gaunt and tall, and naked he walked into the black salt sea. The water was icy cold, yet he did not flinch from his god's caress. A wave smashed against his chest, staggering him. The next broke over his head. He could taste the salt on his lips and feel the god around him, and his ears rang with the glory of his song. *Nine sons were born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, and I was the least of them, as weak and frightened as a girl. But no longer. That man is drowned, and the god has made me strong.* The cold salt sea surrounded him, embraced him, reached down through his weak man's flesh and touched his bones. *Bones,* he thought. *The bones of the soul. Balon's bones, and Urri's. The truth is in our bones, for flesh decays and bone endures. And on the hill of Nagga, the bones of the Grey King's hall . . .*

And gaunt and pale and shivering, Aeron Damphair struggled back to the shore, a wiser man than he had been when he stepped into the sea. For he had found the answer in his bones, and the way was plain before him. The night was so cold that his body seemed to steam as he stalked back toward his shelter, but there was a fire burning in his heart, and sleep came easily for once, unbroken by the scream of iron hinges.

When he woke, the day was bright and windy. Aeron broke his fast on a broth of clams and seaweed cooked above a driftwood fire. No sooner had he finished than The Merlyn descended from his towerhouse with half a dozen guards to seek him out. "The king is dead," the Damphair told him.

"Aye. I had a bird. And now another." The Merlyn was a bald round fleshy man who styled himself "Lord" in the manner of the green lands, and dressed in furs and velvets. "One raven summons me to Pyke, another to Ten Towers. You krakens have too many arms, you pull a man to pieces. What say you, priest? Where should I send my longships?"

Aeron scowled. "Ten Towers, do you say? What kraken calls you there?" Ten Towers was the seat of the Lord of Harlaw.

"The Princess Asha. She has set her sails for home. The Reader sends out ravens, summoning all her friends to Harlaw. He says that Balon meant for her to sit the Seastone Chair."

"The Drowned God shall decide who sits the Seastone Chair," the priest said. "Kneel, that I might bless you." Lord Merlyn sank to his knees, and Aeron uncorked his skin and poured a stream of seawater on his bald pate. "Lord God who drowned for us, let Meldred your servant be born again from the sea. Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel." Water ran down Merlyn's fat cheeks to soak his beard and fox-fur mantle. "What is

The decks of Euron's ship were painted red, to better hide the blood that soaked them.

dead may never die," Aeron finished, "but rises again, harder and stronger." But when Merlyn rose, he told him, "Stay and listen, that you may spread god's word."

Three feet from the water's edge the waves broke around a rounded granite boulder. It was there that Aeron Damphair stood, so all his school might see him, and hear the words he had to say. "We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return," he began, as he had a hundred times before. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, and now he feasts beneath the waves." He raised his hands. *"The iron king is dead!* Yet a king will come again! For what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!"

"A king shall rise!" the drowned men cried.

"He shall. He must. But who?" The Damphair listened a moment, but only the waves gave answer. *"Who shall be our king?"*

The drowned men began to slam their driftwood cudgels one against the other. *"Damphair!"* they cried. *"Damphair King! Aeron King! Give us Damphair!"*

Aeron shook his head. "If a father has two sons and gives to one an axe and to the other a net, which does he intend should be the warrior?"

"The axe is for the warrior," Rus shouted back, "the net for a fisher of the seas."

"Aye," said Aeron. "The god took me deep beneath the waves and drowned the worthless thing I was. When he cast me forth again he gave me eyes to see, ears to hear, and a voice to spread his word, that I might be his prophet and teach his truth to those who have forgotten. I was not made to sit upon the Seastone Chair . . . no more than Euron Crow's Eye. For I have heard the god, who says, *no godless man may sit my Seastone Chair!"*

The Merlyn crossed his arms against his chest. "Is it Asha, then? Or Victarion? Tell us, priest!"

"The Drowned God will tell you, but not here." Aeron pointed at The Merlyn's fat white face. "Look not to me, nor to the laws of men, but to the sea. Raise your sails and unship your oars, my lord, and take yourself to Old Wyk. You, and all the captains and the kings. Go not to Pyke, to bow before the godless, nor to Harlaw to consort with scheming women. Point your prow toward Old Wyk, where stood the Grey King's hall. In the name of the Drowned God I summon you. *I summon all of you!* Leave your halls and hovels, your castles and your keeps, and return to Nagga's hill to make a kingsmoot!"

The Merlyn gaped at him. "A kingsmoot? There has not been a true kingsmoot in . . ."

". . . *too long a time!"* Aeron cried in anguish. "Yet in the dawn of days the ironborn chose their own kings, raising up the worthiest amongst them. It is time we returned to the Old Way, for only that shall make us great again. It was a kingsmoot that chose Urras Ironfoot for High King, and placed a driftwood crown upon his brows. Sylas Flatnose, Harrag Hoare, the Old Kraken, the kingsmoot raised them all. And from *this* kingsmoot shall emerge a man to finish the work King Balon has begun, and win us back our freedoms. Go *not* to Pyke, nor to the Ten Towers of Harlaw, but to Old Wyk, I say again. Seek the hill of Nagga and the bones of the Grey King's hall, for in that holy place when the moon has drowned and come again we shall make ourselves a worthy king, a *godly* king." He raised his bony hands on high again. "Listen! Listen to the waves! Listen to the god! He is speaking to us, and he says, *We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot!"*

A roar went up at that, and the drowned men beat their cudgels one against the other. "A *kingsmoot!"* they shouted. *"A kingsmoot, a kingsmoot. No king but from the kingsmoot!"* And the clamor that they made was so thunderous that surely the Crow's Eye heard the shouts on Pyke, and the vile Storm God in his cloudy hall. And Aeron Damphair knew he had done well.

THE KRAKEN'S DAUGHTER

The hall was loud with drunken Harlaws, distant cousins all. Each lord had hung his banner behind the benches where his men were seated. *Too few,* thought Asha Greyjoy, looking down from the gallery, *too few by far.* The benches were three-quarters empty.

Qarl the Maid had said as much, when the *Black Wind* was approaching from the sea. He had counted the longships moored beneath her uncle's castle, and his mouth had tightened. "They have not come," he observed, "or not enough of them." It was no more than the truth, but Asha had not dared agree with him, out where her crew might hear her. She did not doubt their devotion, their willingness to die for her, but even ironborn will hesitate to throw away their lives for a cause that's plainly hopeless.

Do I have so few friends as this? Amongst the banners, she saw the silver fish of Botley, the stone tree of the Stonetrees, the black leviathan of Volmark, the nooses of the Myres. The rest were Harlaw scythes. Boremund placed his upon a pale blue field, Hotho's was girdled within an embattled border, and the Knight had quartered his with the gaudy peacock of his mother's House. Even Sigfryd Silverhair showed two scythes counterchanged on a field divided bendwise. Only *the* Lord Harlaw displayed the silver scythe plain upon a night black field, as it had flown in the dawn of days: Rodrik, called the Reader, Lord of the Ten Towers, Lord of Harlaw, Harlaw of Harlaw . . . her favorite uncle.

Lord Rodrik's high seat was vacant. Two scythes of beaten silver crossed above it, so huge that even a giant would have difficulty wielding them, but beneath were only empty cushions. Asha was not surprised. The feast was long concluded. Only bones and greasy platters remained upon the trestle tables. The rest was drinking, and her uncle Rodrik had never been partial to the company of quarrelsome drunks.

She turned to Three-Tooth, an old woman of fearful age who had been uncle's steward since she was known as Twelve-Tooth. "My uncle is with his books?"

"Aye, where else?" The woman was so old that a septon had once said she must have nursed the Crone. That was when the Faith was still tolerated on the isles. Lord Rodrik had kept septons at Ten Towers, not for his soul's sake but for his books. "With the books, and Botley. He was with him too."

Botley's standard hung in the hall, a shoal of silver fish upon a pale green field, though Asha had not seen his *Swiftfin* amongst the other longships. "I had heard my nuncle Crow's Eye had old Sawane Botley drowned."

"Lord *Tristifer* Botley, this one is."

Tris. She wondered what had happened to Sawane's elder son, Harren. *I will find out soon enough, no doubt. This should be awkward.* She had not seen Tris Botley since . . . no, she ought not dwell on it. "And my lady mother?"

"Abed," said Three-Tooth, "in the Widow's Tower."

Aye, where else? The widow the tower was named after was her aunt. Lady Gwynesse had come home to mourn after her husband had died off Fair Isle during Balon Greyjoy's first rebellion. "I will only stay until my grief has passed," she had told her brother, famously, "though by rights Ten Towers should be mine, for I am seven years your elder." Long years had passed since then, but still the widow lingered, grieving, and muttering from time to time that the castle should be hers. *And now Lord Rodrik has a second hall-mad widowed sister beneath his roof,* Asha reflected. *Small wonder if he seeks solace in his books.*

Even now, it was hard to credit that frail, sickly Lady Alannys had outlived her husband Lord Balon, who had seemed so hard and strong. When Asha had sailed away to war, she had done so with a heavy heart, fearing that her mother might well die before she could return. Not once had she thought that her father might perish instead. *The Drowned God plays savage japes upon us all, but men are crueler still.* A sudden storm and a broken rope had sent Balon Greyjoy to his death. *Or so they claim.*

Asha had last seen her mother when she stopped at Ten Towers to take on fresh water, on her way north to strike at Deepwood Motte. Alannys Harlaw never had the sort of beauty the singers cherished, but her daughter had loved her fierce strong face and the laughter in her eyes. On that last visit, though, she had found Lady Alannys in a window seat huddled beneath a pile of furs, staring out across the sea. *Is this my mother, or her ghost?* she remembered thinking, as she'd kissed her cheek. Her mother's skin had been parchment thin, her long hair white. Some pride remained in the way she held her head, but her eyes were dim and cloudy, and her mouth had trembled when she asked after Theon. "Did you bring my baby boy?" she had asked. Theon had been ten years old when he was carried off to Winterfell a hostage, and so far as Lady Alannys was concerned he would always be ten years old, it seemed. "Theon could not come," Asha had to tell her. "Father sent him reaving along the Stony Stone." Lady Alannys had naught to say to that. She only nodded slowly, yet it was plain to see how deep her daughter's words had cut her.

And now I must tell her that Theon is dead, and drive yet another dagger through her heart. There were two knives buried there already. On the blades were writ the words *Rodrik* and *Maron,* and many a time they twisted cruelly in the night. *I will see her on the morrow,* Asha vowed to herself. Her journey had been long and wearisome, she could not face her mother now.

"I must speak with Lord Rodrik," she told Three-Tooth. "See to my crew, once they're done unloading *Black Wind.* They'll bring captives. I want them to have warm beds and a hot meal."

"There's cold beef in the kitchens. And mustard in a big stone jar, from Oldtown." The thought of that mustard made the old woman smile. A single long brown tooth poked from her gums.

"That will not serve. We had a rough crossing. I want something hot in their bellies." Asha hooked a thumb through the studded belt about her hips. "Lady Glover and the children should not want for wood nor warmth. Put them in some tower, not the dungeons. The babe is sick."

"Babes are often sick. Most die, and folks are sorry. I shall ask my lord where to put these wolf folk."

She caught the woman's nose between thumb and forefinger, and pinched. "You will do as I say. And if *this* babe dies, no one will be sorrier than you." Three-Tooth squealed and promised to obey, till Asha let her loose and went to find her uncle.

It was good to walk these halls again. Ten Towers had always felt like home to Asha, much more so than Pyke. *Not one castle, ten castles squashed together,* she had thought, the first time she had seen it. She remembered breathless races up and down the steps and along wallwalks and covered bridges, fishing off the Long Stone Quay, days and nights lost amongst her uncle's wealth of books. His grandfather's grandfather had raised the castle, the newest on the isles. Lord Theomore Harlaw had lost three sons in the cradle and laid the blame upon the flooded cellars, damp stones, and festering nitre of ancient Harlaw Hall. Ten Towers was airier, more comfortable, better sited . . . but Lord Theomore was a changeable man, as any of his wives might have testified. He'd had six of those, as dissimilar as his ten towers.

She only nodded slowly, yet it was plain to see how deep her **daughter's words had cut her.**

The Book Tower was the fattest of the ten, octagonal in shape and made with great blocks of hewn stone. The stair was built within the thickness of the walls. Asha climbed quickly, to the fifth storey and the room where her uncle read. *Not that there are any rooms where he does not read.* Lord Rodrik was seldom seen without a book in hand, be it in the privy, on the deck of his *Sea Song,* or whilst holding audience. Asha had oft seen him reading on his high seat beneath the silver scythes. He would listen to each case as it was laid before him, pronounce his judgement . . . and read a bit whilst his captain-of-guards went to bring in the next supplicant.

She found him hunched over a table by a window, surrounded by parchment scrolls that might have come from Valyria before its Doom and heavy leather-bound books with bronze and iron hasps. Beeswax candles as thick and tall as a man's arm burned on either side of where he sat, on ornate iron holders. Lord Rodrik Harlaw was neither fat nor slim; neither tall nor short; neither ugly nor handsome. His hair was brown, as were his eyes, though the short, neat beard he favored had gone grey. All in all, he was an ordinary man, distinguished only by his love of written words, which so many ironborn found unmanly and perverse.

"Nuncle." She closed the door behind her. "What reading was so urgent that you leave your guests without a host?"

"Archmaester Marwyn's *Book of Lost Books.*" He lifted his gaze from the page to study her. "Hotho brought me a copy from Oldtown. He has a daughter he would have me wed." Lord Rodrik tapped the book with a long nail. "See here? Marwyn claims to have found three pages of *Signs and Portents,* visions written down by the maiden daughter of Aenar Targaryen before the Doom came to Valryia. Does Lanny know that you are here?"

"Not as yet." *Lanny* was his pet name for her mother; only the Reader called her that. "Let her rest." Asha moved a stack of books off a stool, and seated herself. "Three-Tooth seems to have lost two more of her teeth. Do you call her One-Tooth now?"

"I seldom call her at all. The woman frightens me. What hour is it?" Lord Rodrik glanced out the window, at the moonlit sea. "Dark, so soon? I had not noticed. You come late. We looked for you some days ago."

"The winds were against us, and I had captives to concern me. Robett Glover's wife and children. The youngest is still at the breast, and Lady Glover's milk dried up during our crossing. I had no choice but to beach *Black Wind* upon the Stony Shore and send my men out to find a wet nurse. They found a goat instead. The girl does not thrive. Is there a nursing mother in the village? Deepwood is important to my plans."

"Your plans must change. You come too late."

"Late and hungry." She stretched her long legs out beneath the table, and turned the pages of the nearest book, a septon's discourse on Maegor the Cruel's war against the Poor Fellows. "Oh, and thirsty too. A horn of ale would go down well, nuncle."

Lord Rodrik pursed his lips. "You know I do not permit food nor drink in my library. The books—"

"—might suffer harm." Asha laughed.

Her uncle frowned. "You do like to provoke me."

"Oh, don't look so aggrieved. I have never met a man I didn't provoke, you should know that well enough by now. But enough of me. You are well?"

He shrugged. "Well enough. My eyes grow weaker. I have sent to Myr for a lens to help me read."

"And how fares my aunt?"

Lord Rodrik sighed. "Still seven years my elder, and convinced Ten Towers should be hers. Gwynesse grows forgetful, but that she does not forget. She mourns for her dead husband as deeply as she did the day he died, though she cannot always recall his name."

"I am not certain she ever knew his name." Asha closed the septon's book with a *thump.* "Was my father murdered?"

"So your mother believes"

There were times when she would gladly have murdered him herself, she thought. "And what does my nuncle believe?"

"Balon fell to his death when a rope bridge broke beneath him. A storm was rising, and the bridge was swaying and twisting with each gust of wind." Rodrik shrugged. "Or so we are told. Your mother had a bird from Maester Wendamyr."

Asha slid her dirk out of its sheath, and began to clean the dirt from beneath her fingernails. "Three years away, and the Crow's Eye returns the very day my father dies."

"The day after, we had heard. *Silence* was still out to sea when Balon died, or so it is claimed. Even so, I will agree that Euron's return was . . . timely, shall we say?"

"That is not how I would say it." Asha slammed the point of the dirk into the table. *"Where are my ships?* I counted two score longships moored below, not near enough to throw the Crow's Eye off my father's chair."

"I sent the summons. In your name, for the love I bear you and your mother. House Harlaw has gathered. Stonetree as well, and Volmark. Some Myres . . ."

"All from the isle of Harlaw . . . one isle, out of seven. I saw one lonely Botley banner in the hall, from Pyke. Where are the ships from Saltcliffe, from Orkwood, from the Wyks?"

"Baelor Blacktyde came from Blacktyde to consult with me, and just as soon set sail again." Lord Rodrik closed *The Book of Lost Books.* "He is on Old Wyk by now."

"Old Wyk?" Asha had feared he was about to say that they all gone to Pyke, to do homage to the Crow's Eye. "Why Old Wyk?"

"I thought you would have heard. Aeron Damphair has called a kingsmoot."

Asha threw back her head and laughed. "The Drowned God must have shoved a pricklefish up Uncle Aeron's arse. A *kingsmoot?* Is this some jape, or does he mean it truly?"

"The Damphair has not japed since he was drowned. And the other priests have taken up the call. Blind Beron Blacktyde, Tarle the Thrice-Drowned . . . even the Old Grey Gull has left that rock he lives on, to preach this kingsmoot all across Harlaw. The captains are gathering on Old Wyk as we speak."

Asha was astonished. "Has the Crow's Eye agreed to attend this holy farce and abide by its decision?"

"The Crow's Eye does not confide in me. Since he summoned me to Pyke to do him homage, I have had no word from Euron."

A kingsmoot. This is something new . . . or rather, something very old. "And my uncle Victarion? What does he make of the Damphair's notion?"

"Victarion was sent word of your father's death. And of this kingsmoot too, I do not doubt. Beyond that, I cannot say."

Better a kingsmoot than a war. "I believe I'll kiss the Damphair's smelly feet, and pluck the seaweed from out between his toes." Asha wrenched loose her dirk and sheathed it once again. "A bloody *kingsmoot!*"

"On Old Wyk," confirmed Lord Rodrik. "Though I pray it is not bloody. I have been consulting Haereg's *History of the Ironborn.* When last the salt kings and the rock kings met in kingsmoot, Urron of Orkmont let his axemen loose among them, and Nagga's ribs turned red with gore. House Greyiron ruled unchosen for a thou-

"Silence was out to sea, or so it is claimed. Even so, **I will agree that Euron's return was . . . timely, shall we say?"**

sand years from that dark day, until the Andals came."

"You must lend me Haereg's book, nuncle." She would need to learn all she could of kingsmoots before she reached Old Wyk.

"You may read it here. It is old and fragile." He studied her, frowning. "Archmaester Rigney once wrote that history is a wheel, for the nature of man is fundamentally unchanging. What has happened before will perforce happen again, he said. I think of that whenever I contemplate the Crow's Eye. Euron Greyjoy sounds queerly like Urron Greyiron to these old ears. I shall not go to Old Wyk. Nor should you."

Asha smiled. "And miss the first kingsmoot called in . . . how long *has* it been, nuncle?"

"Four thousand years, if Haereg can be believed. Half that, if you accept Maester Denestan's arguments in *Questions.* Going to Old Wyk serves no purpose. You will not want to hear this, Asha, but you will not be chosen. No woman has ever ruled the ironborn. Gwynesse *is* seven years my elder, but when our father died the Ten Towers came to me. It will be the same for you. You are Balon's daughter, not his son. And you have three uncles."

"Four."

"Three kraken uncles. I do not count."

"You do with me. So long as I have my nuncle of Ten Towers, I have Harlaw." Harlaw was not the largest of the Iron Islands, but it was the richest and most populous, and Lord Rodrik's power was not to be despised. On Harlaw, Harlaw had no rival. The Volmarks and Stonetrees had large holdings on the isle and boasted famous captains and fierce warriors of their own, but even the fiercest bent beneath the scythe. The Kennings and the Myres, once bitter foes, had long ago been beaten down to vassals.

"My cousins do me fealty, and in war I should command their swords and sails. In kingsmoot, though . . ." Lord Rodrik shook his head. "Beneath the bones of Nagga every captain stands as equal. Some may shout your name, I do not doubt it. But not enough. And when the shouts ring out for Victarion or the Crow's Eye, some of those now drinking in my hall will join the rest. I say again, do not sail into this storm. Your fight is hopeless."

"No fight is hopeless till it has been fought. I have the best claim. I am the heir of Balon's body."

"You are still a willful child. Think of your poor mother. You are all that Lanny has left to her. I will put a torch to *Black Wind* if need be, to keep you here."

"What, and make me swim to Old Wyk?"

"A long cold swim, for a crown you cannot keep. Your father had more courage than sense. The Old Way served the isles well when we were one small kingdom amongst many, but Aegon's Conquest put an end to that. Balon refused to see what was plain before him. The Old Way died with Black Harren and his sons."

"I know that." Asha had loved her father, but she did not delude herself. Balon had been blind in some respects. *A brave man but a bad lord.* "Does that mean we must live and die as thralls to the Iron Throne? If there are rocks to starboard and a storm to port, a wise captain steers a third course."

"Show me this third course."

"I shall . . . at my queensmoot. Nuncle, how can you even think of not attending? This will be history, alive . . ."

"I prefer my history dead. Dead history is writ in ink, the living sort in blood."

"Do you want to die old and craven in your bed?"

"How else? Though not till I'm done reading." Lord Rodrik went to the window. "You have not asked about your lady mother."

I was afraid. "How is she?"

"Stronger. She may yet outlive us all. She will certainly outlive you, if you persist in this folly. She eats more than she did when she first came here, and oft sleeps through the night."

"Good." In her final years on Pyke, Lady Alannys could not sleep. She would wander the halls at night with a candle, looking for her sons. *"Maron?"* she would call shrilly. *"Rodrik, where are you? Theon, my baby, come to mother."* Many a time Asha had watched the maester draw splinters from her mother's heels of a morning, after she had crossed the swaying plank bridge to the Sea Tower on bare feet. "I will see her in the morning."

"She will ask for word of Theon."

The Prince of Winterfell. "What have you told her?"

"Little and less. There was naught to tell." He hesitated. "You are certain that he is dead?"

"I am certain of nothing."

"You found a body?"

"We found parts of many bodies. The wolves were there before us . . . the four-legged sort, but they showed scant reverence for their two-legged kin. The bones of the slain were scattered, cracked open for their marrow. I confess, it was hard to know what happened there. It seemed as though the northmen fought among themselves."

"Crows will fight over a dead man's flesh, and kill each other for his eyes." Lord Rodrik stared across the sea, watching the play of moonlight on the waves. "We had one king, then five. Now all I see are crows, squabbling over the corpse of Westeros." He fastened the shutters. "Do not go to Old Wyk, Asha. Stay with your mother. We shall not have her long, I fear."

Asha shifted in her seat. "My mother raised me to be bold. If I do not go I will spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened if I had."

"If you do go, the rest of your life may be too short for wondering"

"Better that than fill my days complaining to anyone who will listen that the Seastone Chair by rights was mine. I am no Gwynesse."

That made him wince. "Asha, my two tall sons fed the crabs of Fair Isle. I am not like to wed again. Stay, and I shall name you heir to the Ten Towers. Be content with that."

"Ten Towers?" *Would that I could.* "Your cousins will not like that. The Knight, old Sigfryd, Hotho Humpback—"

"They have lands and seats of their own."

True enough. Damp, decaying Harlaw Hall belonged to old Sigfryd Harlaw, the Silverhair; humpbacked Hotho Harlaw had his seat at the Tower of Glimmering, on a crag above the

"I say again, do not sail into this storm. **Your fight is hopeless."**

western coast. The Knight, Ser Harras Harlaw, kept court at Grey Garden; Boremund the Blue ruled atop Harridan Hill. But each was subject to Lord Rodrik. "Boremund has three sons, Sigfryd Silverhair has grandsons, and Hotho has ambitions," Asha said. "They all mean to follow you, even Sigfryd. That one intends to live forever."

"The Knight will be the Lord of Harlaw after me," her uncle said, "but he can rule from Grey Garden as easily as from here. Do fealty to him for the castle and Ser Harras will protect you."

"I can protect myself. Nuncle, I am a kraken. Asha, of House *Greyjoy.*" She pushed to her feet. "It's my father's seat I want, not yours. Those scythes of yours look perilous. One could fall and slice my head off. No, I'll sit the Seastone Chair."

"Then you are just another crow, screaming for carrion." Rodrik sat again behind his table. "Go. I wish to return to Archmaester Marwyn and his search."

"Let me know if he should find another page." Her uncle was her uncle. He would never change. *But he will come to Old Wyk, no matter what he says.*

By now her crew would be eating in the hall. Asha knew she ought to join them, to speak of this gathering on Old Wyk and what it meant for them. Her own men would be solidly behind her, but she would need the rest as well, her Harlaw cousins, the Volmarks, and the Stonetrees. *Those are the ones I must win.* Her victory at Deepwood Motte would serve her in good stead, once her men began to boast of it, as she knew they would. The crew of her *Black Wind* took a perverse pride in the deeds of their woman captain. Half of them loved her like a daughter, and other half wanted to spread her legs, but either sort would die for her. *And me for them,* she was thinking as she shouldered through the door at the bottom of the steps, into the moonlit yard.

"Asha?" A shadow stepped out from behind the well.

Her hand went to her dirk at once . . . until the moonlight transformed the dark shape into a man in a sealskin cloak. *Another ghost.* "Tris. I'd thought to find you in the hall."

"I wanted to see you."

"What part of me, I wonder?" She grinned. "Well, here I stand, all grown up. Look all you like."

"A woman." He moved closer. "And beautiful."

Tristifer Botley had filled out since last she'd seen him, but he had had the same unruly hair that she remembered, and eyes as large and trusting as a seal's. *Sweet eyes, truly.* That was the trouble with poor Tristifer; he was too sweet for the Iron Islands. *His face has grown comely,* she thought. As a boy Tris had been much troubled by pimples. Asha had suffered the same affliction; perhaps that had been what drew them together.

"I was sorry to hear about your father," she told him.

"I grieve for yours."

Why? Asha almost asked. It was Balon who'd sent the boy away from Pyke, to be a ward of Baelor Blacktyde. "Is it true you are Lord Botley now?"

"In name, at least. Harren died at Moat Cailin. One of the bog devils shot him with a poisoned arrow. But I am the lord of nothing. When my father denied his claim to the Seastone Chair, the Crow's Eye drowned him, and made my uncles swear him fealty. Even after that he gave half my father's lands to Iron Holt. Lord Wynch was the first man to bend his knee and call him king."

House Wynch was strong on Pyke, but Asha took care not let her dismay show. "Wynch never had your father's courage."

"Your uncle bought him," Tris said. "The *Silence* returned with holds full of treasure. Plate and pearls, emeralds and rubies, sapphires big as eggs, bags of coin so heavy that no man can lift them . . . the Crow's Eye has been buying friends at every hand. My uncle Germund calls himself Lord Botley now, and rules in Lordsport as your uncle's man."

"You are the rightful Lord Botley," she assured him. "Once I hold the Seastone Chair, your father's lands shall be restored."

"If you like. It's naught to me. You look so lovely in the moonlight, Asha. A woman grown now, but I remember when you were a skinny girl with a face all full of pimples."

Why must they always mention the pimples? "I remember that as well." *Though not as fondly as you do.* Of the five boys her mother had brought to Pyke to foster after Ned Stark had taken her last living son as hostage, Tris had been closest to Asha in age. He had not been the first boy she had ever kissed, but he was the first to undo the laces of her jerkin and slip a sweaty hand beneath to feel her budding breasts.

I would have let him feel more than that if he'd been bold enough. Her first flowering had come upon her during the war and wakened her desire, but even before that Asha had been curious. *He was there, he was mine own age, and he was willing, that was all it was . . . that, and the moon blood.* Even so, she'd called it love, till Tris began to go on about the children she would bear him; a dozen sons at least, and oh, some daughters too. "I don't want to have a dozen sons," she had told him, appalled. "I want to have *adventures.*" Not long after, Maester Qalen found them at their play, and young Tristifer Botley was sent away to Blacktyde.

"I wrote you letters," he said, "but Maester Joseran would not send them. Once I gave a stag to an oarsman on a trader bound for Lordsport, who promised to put my letter in your hands."

"Your oarsman winkled you and threw your letter in the sea."

"I feared as much. They would not give me yours either."

I wrote none. In truth, she had been relieved when Tris was sent away. By then his fumblings had begun to bore her. That was not something he would care to hear, however. "Aeron Damphair has called a kingsmoot. Will you come and speak for me?"

"I will go anywhere with you, but . . . Lord Blacktyde says this kingsmoot is a dangerous folly. He thinks your uncle will descend on them and kill them all, as Urron did. The Crow's Eye has been gathering men on Pyke. Orkwood of Orkmont brought

Her own men would be solidly behind her, but **she would need the rest** as well, her Harlaw cousins, the Volmarks, and the Stonetrees.

him twenty longships, and Pinchface Jon Myre a dozen. Left-Hand Lucas Codd is with them. And Harren Half-Hoare, the Red Oarsman, Kemmett Pyke the Bastard, Rodrik Freeborn, Torwold Browntooth . . ."

"Men of small account." Asha knew them all, and liked none of them. "The sons of salt wives, the grandsons of thralls. The Codds . . . do you know their *words?"*

"Though All Men Do Despise Us," Tris said, "but if they catch you in those nets of theirs, you'll be as dead as if they had been dragonlords. And there's worse. The Crow's Eye brought back monsters from the east . . . aye, and *wizards* too"

"Nuncle always had a fondness for freaks and fools," said Asha. "My father used to fight with him about it. Let the wizards call upon their gods. The Damphair will call on ours, and drown them. Will I have your voice at the queensmoot, Tris?"

"You shall have all of me. I am your man, forever. Asha, I would wed you. Your lady mother has given her consent." She stifled a groan. *You might have asked me first . . . though you might not have liked the answer half so well.*

"I am no second son now," he went on. "I am the rightful Lord Botley, as you said yourself. And you are—"

"What I am will be settled on Old Wyk. Tris, we are no longer children fumbling at each other and trying to see what fits where. You think you want to wed me, but you don't."

"I do. All I dream about is you. Asha, I swear upon the bones of Nagga, I have never touched another woman."

"Go touch one . . . or two, or ten. I have touched more men than I count. Some with my lips, more with my axe." She had surrendered her virtue at six-and-ten, to a beautiful blond-haired sailor on a trading galley up from Lys. He only knew six words of the Common Tongue, but "fuck" was one of them, the very word she'd hoped to hear. Afterward Asha had the sense to find a woods witch, who showed her how to brew moon tea to keep her belly flat.

Botley blinked, as if he did not quite understand what she had said. "You . . . I thought that you would wait. Why . . ." He rubbed his mouth. "Asha, were you *forced?"*

"So forced I tore his tunic. You do not want to wed me, take my word on that. You are a sweet boy and always were, but I am no sweet girl. If we wed, soon enough you'd come to hate me."

"Never. Asha, I . . . I have *ached* for you."

She had heard enough of this. A sickly mother, a murdered father, a kingsmoot, and a plague of uncles were enough for any woman to contend with; she did not require a lovesick puppy. "Find a brothel, Tris. They'll cure you of that ache."

"I could never . . ." Tristifer shook his head. "You and I were meant to be, Asha. I have always known you would be my wife, and the mother of my sons." He seized her upper arm.

In a blink her dirk was at his throat. "Take your hand away, or you won't live long enough to breed a son. *Now."* When he did, she lowered the blade. "You want a woman, well and good. I'll put one in your bed tonight. Pretend she's me, if that will give you pleasure, but do not presume to grab at me again. I am your queen, not your wife. Remember that." Asha sheathed her dirk and left him standing there, with a fat drop of blood slowly creeping down his neck, black in the pale light of the moon.

"You were your brother's strong right arm. You must pick up the sword that he let fall."

THE IRON CAPTAIN

The wind was blowing from the north as the *Iron Victory* came round the point, and entered the holy bay called Nagga's Cradle.

Victarion joined Nute the Barber at her prow. Ahead loomed the sacred shore of Old Wyk and the grassy hill above it, where the ribs of Nagga rose from the earth like the trunks of great white trees, as wide around as a dromond's mast and twice as tall.

The bones of the Grey King's hall. Victarion could feel the magic of this place. "Balon stood beneath those bones, when first he named himself a king," he recalled. "He swore to win us back our freedoms, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned placed a driftwood crown upon his head. *'BALON!'* they cried. *'BALON! BALON KING!'"*

"They will shout your name as loud," said Nute.

Victarion nodded, though he did not share the Barber's certainty. *Balon had three sons, and a daughter he loved well.*

He had said as much to his captains at Moat Cailin, when first they urged him to claim the Seastone Chair. "Balon's sons are dead," Red Ralf Stonehouse had argued, "and Asha is a woman. You were your brother's strong right arm, you must pick up the sword that he let fall." When Victarion reminded them that Balon had commanded him to hold the Moat against the northmen, Ralf Kenning said, "The wolves are broken, lord. What good to win this swamp and lose the isles?" And Ralf the Limper added, "The Crow's Eye has been too long away. He knows us not."

Euron Greyjoy, King of the Isles and the North. The thought woke an old rage in his heart, but still . . .

"Words are wind," Victarion told them, "and the only good wind is that which fills our sails. Would you have me fight the Crow's Eye? Brother against brother, ironborn against ironborn?" Euron was still his elder, no matter how much bad blood might be between them. *No man is as accursed as the kinslayer.*

But when the Damphair's summons came, the call to kingsmoot, then all was changed. *Aeron speaks with the Drowned God's voice,* Victarion reminded himself, *and if the Drowned God wills that I should sit the Seastone Chair . . .* The next day he gave command of Moat Cailin to Ralf Kenning, and set off overland for the Fever River where the Iron Fleet lay amongst the reeds and willows. Rough seas and fickle winds had delayed him, but only one ship had been lost, and he was home.

Grief and *Iron Vengeance* were close behind as *Iron Victory* passed the head-

land. Behind came *Hardhand, Iron Wind, Grey Ghost, Lord Quellon, Lord Vikon, Lord Dagon,* and the rest, nine tenths of the Iron Fleet, sailing on the evening tide in a ragged column that extended back long leagues. The sight of their sails filled Victarion Greyjoy with content. No man had ever loved his wives half as well as the Lord Captain loved his ships.

Along the sacred strand of Old Wyk, longships lined the shore as far as the eye could see, their masts thrust up like spears. In the deeper waters rode prizes: cogs, carracks, and dromonds won in raid or war, too big to run ashore. From prow and stern and mast flew familiar banners.

Victarion's hands closed into fists. He had beaten four men to death with those hands, and one wife as well. Though his hair was flecked with hoarfrost, he was as strong as he had ever been, with a bull's broad chest and a boy's flat belly. *The kinslayer is accursed in the eyes of gods and men,* Balon had reminded him, on the day he sent the Crow's Eye off to sea.

"He is here," Victarion told the Barber. "Drop sail. We proceed on oars alone. Command *Grief* and *Iron Vengeance* to stand between *Silence* and the sea. The rest of the fleet to seal the bay. None are to leave save at my command, neither man nor crow."

On the iron islands they were one and the same, **for every captain was king** on his own deck, and every king must be a captain.

Nute the Barber squinted toward the strand. "Is that Lord Harlaw's *Sea Song?"* The Barber was a thick-set man with bandy legs and long arms, but his eyes were not so keen as they had been when he was young. In those days he could throw an axe so well that men said he could shave you with it.

"Sea Song, aye." Rodrik the Reader had left his books, it would seem. "And there old Drumm's *Thunderer,* with Blacktyde's *Nightflyer* beside her." Victarion's eyes were as sharp as they had ever been. Even with their sails furled and their banners hanging limp, he knew them, as befit the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. *"Swiftfin* too. Some son of Sawane Botley." The Crow's Eye had drowned Lord Botley, Victarion had heard, and his heir had sailed to Moat Cailin with him and died there, but he'd had brothers. *How many? Four? No, five, by three different wives, and none with any cause to love the Crow's Eye.*

And then he saw her: a single-masted longship, lean and low, with a dark red hull. Her sails, now furled, were black as a starless sky. Even at anchor *Silence* looked both cruel and fast. On her prow was a black iron maiden with one arm outstretched. Her waist was slender, her breasts high and proud, her legs long and shapely. A mane of black iron hair streamed from her head, and her eyes were mother-of-pearl, but she had no mouth.

The men upon the shore had spied their sails. Shouts echoed across the bay as friends and kin called out greetings. But not from *Silence.* On her decks a motley crew of mutes and mongrels spoke no word as the *Iron Victory* drew nigh. Men black as tar stared out at him, and others squat and hairy as the apes of Sothoros. *Monsters,* Victarion thought.

They dropped anchor twenty yards from *Silence.* "Lower a boat. I would go ashore." He buckled on his sword-belt as the rowers took their places; his longsword rested on one hip, a dirk upon the other. Nute the Barber fastened the Lord Captain's cloak about his shoulders. It was made of nine layers of cloth-of-gold, sewn in the shape of the kraken of Greyjoy, arms dangling to his boots. Beneath he wore heavy grey chainmail over boiled black leather. In Moat Cailin he had taken to wearing mail day and night. Sore shoulders and an aching back were easier to bear than bloody bowels. The poisoned arrows of the bog devils need only scratch a man, and a few hours later he would be squirting and screaming as his life ran down his legs in gouts of red and brown. *Whoever wins the Seastone Chair, I shall deal with the bog devils.*

Victarion donned a tall black warhelm, wrought in the shape of an iron kraken, its arms coiled down around his cheeks to meet beneath his jaw. By then the boat was ready. "I put the chests into your charge," he told Nute as he climbed over the side. "See that they are strongly guarded." Much depended on the chests.

"As you command, Your Grace."

Victarion returned a sour scowl. "I am no king as yet." He clambered down into the boat.

Aeron Damphair was waiting for him in the surf with his waterskin slung beneath one arm. The priest was gaunt and tall, though shorter than Victarion. His nose rose like a shark's fin from a bony face, and his eyes were iron. His beard reached to his waist, and tangled ropes of hair slapped at the back of his legs when the wind blew. "Brother," he said as the waves broke white and cold around their ankles, "what is dead can never die."

"But rises again, harder and stronger." Victarion lifted off his helm and knelt. The bay filled his boots and soaked his breeches as Aeron poured a stream of saltwater down upon his brow. And so they prayed.

"Where is our brother Crow's Eye?" the Lord Captain demanded of Aeron Damphair when the prayers were done.

"His is the great tent of cloth-of-gold, there where the din is loudest. He surrounds himself with godless men and monsters, worse than before. In him our father's blood went bad."

"Our mother's blood as well." Victarion would not speak of kinslaying, here in this godly place beneath the bones of Nagga and the Grey King's hall, but many a night he dreamed of driving a mailed fist into Euron's smiling face, until the flesh split and his bad blood ran red and free. *I must not. I pledged my word to Balon.* "All have come?" he asked his priestly brother.

"All who matter. The captains and the kings." On the Iron Islands they were one and the same, for every captain was a king on his own deck, and every king must be a captain. "Do you mean to claim our father's crown?"

Victarion imagined himself seated on the Seastone Chair. "If the Drowned God wils it."

"The waves will speak," said Aeron Damphair, as he turned away. "Listen to the waves, brother"

"Aye." He wondered how his name would sound whispered by waves, and shouted by the captains and the kings.

If the cup should pass to me I will not set it by.

A crowd had gathered round to wish him well and seek his favor. Victarion saw men from every isle; Blacktydes, Tawneys, Orkwoods, Stonetrees, Wynches, and many more. The Goodbrothers of Old Wyk, the Goodbrothers of Great Wyk, and the Goodbrothers of Orkmont all had come. The Codds were there, though every decent man despised them. Humble Shepherds, Weavers, and Netleys rubbed shoulders with men from Houses ancient and proud; even humble Humbles, the blood of thralls and salt wives. A Volmark clapped Victarion on the back; two Sparrs pressed a wineskin into his hands. He drank deep, wiped his mouth, and let them bear him off to their cookfires, to listen to their talk of war and crowns and plunder, and the glory and the freedom of his reign.

That night the men of the Iron Fleet raised a huge sailcloth tent above the tideline, so Victarion might feast half a hundred famous captains on roast kid, salted cod, and lobster. Aeron came as well. He ate fish and drank water, whilst the captains quaffed sufficient ale to float the Iron Fleet. Victarion lost count of all those who promised him their voices. Many were men of note: Fralegg the Strong, clever Alvyn Sharp, humpbacked Hotho Harlaw. Hotho offered him a daughter for his queen. "I have no luck with wives," Victarion told him. His first wife died in childbed, giving him a stillborn daughter. His second had been stricken by a pox. And his third . . .

"A king must have an heir," Hotho insisted. "The Crow's Eye brings three sons to show before the kingsmoot."

"Bastards and mongrels. How old is this daughter?"

"Twelve," said Hotho. "Fair and fertil, newly flowered, with hair the color of honey. Her breasts are small as yet, but she has good hips. She takes after her mother, more than me."

Victarion knew that to mean the girl did not have a hump. Yet when he tried to picture her, he only saw the wife he'd killed. He had sobbed each time he struck her, and afterward carried her down to the rocks to give her to the crabs. "I will gladly look at the girl once I am crowned," he said. That was as much as Hotho dared hope for, and he shambled off content.

Baelor Blacktyde was more difficult to please. He sat by Victarion's elbow in his lambswool tunic of black and green vairy and plush sable cloak, looking more a green land lord than an ironman. "Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them all," he said. "What of you, Lord Captain? If I shout your name will you make an end of this mad war?"

Victarion frowned. "Would you have me bend the knee?"

"If need be. We cannot stand alone against all Westeros. King Robert proved that, to our grief. Balon would pay the iron price for freedom, he said, but our women bought Balon's crowns with empty beds. My mother was one such. The Old Way is dead."

"What is dead can never die, but rises harder and stronger. In a hundred years men will sing of Balon the Bold."

"Balon the Widowmaker, call him. I will gladly trade his freedom for a father. Have you one to give me?"

"What of you, Lord Captain? If I shout your name will you make an end of this mad war?"

When Victarion did not answer, Blacktyde snorted and moved off.

The tent grew hot and smoky. Two of Gorold Goodbrother's sons knocked a table over fighting; Will Humble lost a wager and had to eat his boot; Little Lenwood Tawney fiddled whilst Romny Weaver sang "The Bloody Cup" and "Steel Rain" and the other old reaving songs. Qarl the Maid and Eldred Codd danced the finger dance. A roar of laughter went up when one of Eldred's fingers landed in Ralf the Limper's wine cup.

A woman was amongst those laughing. Victarion rose and saw her by the tent flap, whispering something in the ear of Qarl the Maid that made him laugh as well. He had hoped she would not be fool enough to come here, yet the sight of her made him smile all the same. *"Asha,"* he called in a commanding voice. *"Niece."*

She made her way to his side, lean and lithe in high boots of salt-stained leather, green woolen breeches and brown quilted tunic, a sleeveless leather jerkin half unlaced. "Nuncle." Asha Greyjoy was tall for a woman, yet she had to stand on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I am pleased to see you at my queensmoot."

"Queensmoot?" Victarion had to laugh. "Are you drunk, niece? Sit. I did not spy your *Black Wind* on the strand."

"I beached her beneath Norne Goodbrother's castle and rode across the island." She sat upon a stool, and helped herself unasked to Nute the Barber's wine. Nute raised no objection; he had passed out drunk some time ago. "Who holds the Moat?"

"Ralf Kenning. With the Young Wolf dead, only the bog devils remain to plague us."

"The Starks were not the only northmen. The Iron Throne has named the Lord of the Dreadfort as Warden of the North."

"Would you lesson me in warfare? I was fighting battles when you were sucking mother's milk."

"And losing battles too." Asha took a drink of wine.

Victarion did not like to be reminded of Fair Isle. "Every man should lose a battle in his youth, so he does not lose a war when he is old. You have not come to make a claim, I hope"

She teased him with a smile. "And if I have?"

"There are men who remember when you were a little girl, swimming naked in the sea and playing with your doll."

"I played with axes too"

"You did," he had to grant, "but a woman wants a husband, not a crown. When I am king I'll give you one."

"My nuncle is so good to me. Shall I find a pretty wife for you, when I am queen?"

"I have no luck with wives. How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to see that Uncle Damphair has woken more than he intended. The Drumm means to make a claim, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned was heard to say that Maron Volmark is the true heir of the black line."

"The king must be a kraken."

"The Crow's Eye is a kraken. The elder brother comes before the younger." Asha leaned close. "But I am the child of King Balon's body, so I come before you both. Hear me, nuncle . . ."

But then a sudden silence fell. The singing died, Little Lenwood Tawney lowered his fiddle, men turned their heads. Even the clatter of plates and knives was hushed.

fire gods, gods made of gold with gemstone eyes, gods carved of cedar wood, gods chiseled into mountains, gods of empty air . . . I know every god there is. I have seen their peoples garland them with flowers, and shed the blood of goats and bulls and children in their names. And I have heard their people's prayers. All over this wide world in half a hundred tongues, they pray the same. Cure my withered

Euron had always been the most comely of Lord Quellon's sons, and the years had scarcely seemed to touch his beauty.

A dozen newcomers had entered the feast tent. Victarion saw Pinchface Jon Myre, Torwold Browntooth, Left-Hand Lucas Codd. Germund Botley crossed his arms against the gilded breastplate he had taken off a Lannister captain during Balon's first rebellion. Orkwood of Orkmont stood beside him. Behind them were Stonehand, Quellon Humble, and the Red Oarsman with his fiery hair in braids. Rafe the Shepherd too, and Rafe of Lordsport, and Qarl the Thrall.

And the Crow's Eye, Euron Greyjoy.

He looks unchanged, Victarion thought. *He looks the same as he did the day he laughed at me, and left.* Euron had always been the most comely of Lord Quellon's sons, and the years had scarcely seemed to touch his beauty. His hair was still as black as a midnight sea, with never a whitecap to be seen, and his face was still smooth and pale beneath his neat dark beard. A black leather patch covered Euron's left eye, but his right was blue as a summer sky. *His smiling eye,* thought Victarion.

"Crow's Eye," he said.

"King Crow's Eye, brother." Euron smiled. There was something odd about his lips. They looked very dark in the lamplight, bruised and blue.

"We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot." The Damphair stood. "No godless man—"

"—may sit the Seastone Chair, aye." Euron glanced about the tent. "As it happens I have oft sat upon the Seastone Chair of late. It raises no objections." His smiling eye was glittering. "I ask you, friends, who knows more of gods than me? Horse gods and

leg, make the maiden love me, grant me a healthy son. Save me, succor me, make me wealthy . . . *protect* me! Protect me from mine enemies, protect me from the darkness, protect me from the crabs inside my belly, from the horselords, from the slavers, from the sellswords at my door. Protect me from the *Silence."* He laughed. *"Godless?* Why, Aeron, I am the godliest man ever to raise sail! You serve one god, Damphair, but I have served ten thousand. From Ib to Asshai, when men see *my* sails, they pray."

The priest was shaking, Victarion could see. He raised a boney finger. "They pray to trees and golden idols and goat-headed abominations. False gods . . ."

"Just so," said Euron, "and for that sin I kill them all. I spill their blood upon the sea and sow their screaming women with my seed. Their little gods cannot stop me, so plainly they are false gods. I am more devout than even you, Aeron. Perhaps it should be you who kneels to me for blessing."

The Red Oarsman laughed loudly at that, and the others took their lead from him.

"Fools," said the priest, "fools and thralls and blind men, that is what you are. Do you not see what stands before you?"

"A king," said Quellon Humble.

The Damphair spat, and strode out into the night.

When he was gone, the Crow's Eye turned his smiling eye upon Victarion. "Lord Captain, have you no greeting for a brother long away? Nor you, Asha? How fares your lady mother?"

"Poorly." Asha's tone was clipped and cold. "Some man made her a widow."

Euron shrugged. "I had heard the Storm God swept Balon to his death. Who is this man who slew him? Tell me his name, niece, so I might revenge myself on him."

Asha got to her feet. "You know his name as well as I. Three years you were gone from us, and yet *Silence* returns within a day of my lord father's death."

"Do you accuse me?" Euron asked mildly.

"Should I?" The sharpness in Asha's voice made Victarion frown. It was dangerous to speak so to the Crow's Eye, even when his smiling eye was shining with amusement.

"Do I command the winds?" the Crow's Eye asked his pets.

"No, Your Grace," said Orkwood of Orkmont.

"No man commands the winds," said Germund Botley.

"Would that you did," the Red Oarsman said. "You would sail wherever you liked, and never be becalmed."

"There you have it, from the mouths of three brave men," Euron said. "The *Silence* was at sea when Balon died. If you doubt an uncle's word, I give you leave to ask my crew."

"A crew of mutes? Aye, that would serve me well."

"A husband would serve you well." Euron turned to his followers again. "Torwold, I misremember, do you have a wife?"

"Only the one." Torwold Browntooth grinned, and showed how he had won his name.

"I am unwed," announced Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

"And for good reason," Asha said. "All *women* do despise the Codds as well. Don't look at me so mournful, Lucas. You still have your famous hand." She made a pumping motion with her fist.

Codd cursed, till the Crow's Eye put a hand upon his chest. "Was that courteous, Asha? You have wounded Lucas to the quick."

"Easier than wounding him in the prick. I throw an axe as well as any man, but when the target is so small . . ."

"This girl forgets herself," snarled Pinchface Jon Myre. "Balon let her believe she was a man."

"Your father made the same mistake with you" said Asha.

"Give her to me, Euron," suggested the Red Oarsman. "I'll spank her till her arse is as red as my hair."

"Come try," said Asha, "and hereafter we can call you the Red Eunuch." A throwing axe was in her hand. She tossed it in the air and caught it deftly. "Here is my husband, nuncle. Any man who wants me should take it up with him."

Victarion slammed his fist upon the table. "I'll have no blood shed here. Euron, take your . . . pets . . . and go."

"I had looked for a warmer welcome from you, brother. I am your elder . . . and soon, your rightful king."

Victarion's face darkened. "When the kingsmoot speaks, we shall see who wears the driftwood crown."

"On that we can agree." Euron lifted two fingers to the patch that covered his left eye, and took his leave. The others followed at his heels like mongrel dogs. Silence lingered behind them, till Little Lenwood Tawney took up his fiddle. The wine and ale began to flow again, but several guests had lost their thirst. Eldred Codd slipped out, cradling his bloody hand. Then Will Humble, Hotho Harlaw, a goodly lot of Goodbrothers.

"Nuncle." Asha put a hand upon his shoulder. "Walk with me, if you would."

Outside the tent the wind was rising. Clouds raced across the moon's pale face. They looked a bit like galleys, stroking hard to ram. The stars were few and faint. All along the strand the longships rested, tall masts rising like a forest from the surf. Victarion could hear their hulls creaking as they settled on the sand. He heard the keening of their lines, the sound of banners flapping. Beyond, in the deeper waters of the bay, larger ships bobbed at anchor, grim shadows wreathed in mist.

They walked along the strand together just above the surf, far from the camps and the cookfires. "Tell me true, nuncle," Asha said, "why did Euron go away so suddenly"

"The Crow's Eye oft went reaving"

"Never for so long."

"He took the *Silence* east. A lengthy voyage."

"I asked *why* he went, not where." When he did not answer, Asha said, "I was away when *Silence* sailed. I had taken *Black Wind* around the Arbor to the Stepstones, to steal a few trinkets from the Lyseni pirates. When I came home, Euron was gone and your new wife was dead."

"She was only a salt wife." He had not touched another woman since he gave her to the crabs. *I will need to take a wife when I am king. A true wife, to be my queen and bear me sons. A king must have an heir.*

"My father refused to speak of her," said Asha.

"It does no good to speak of things no man can change." He was weary of the subject. "I saw the Reader's longship."

"It took all my charm to winkle him out of his Book Tower."

She has the Harlaws, then. Victarion's frown grew deeper. "You cannot hope to rule. You are a woman."

"Is that why I always lose the pissing contests?" Asha laughed. "Nuncle, it grieves me to admit it, but it may be that you are right. For four days and four nights, I have been talking with the captains and the kings, listening to what they say . . . and what they will not say. Mine own are with me, and many Harlaws. I have Tris Botley too, and some few others. Not enough." She kicked a rock, and sent it splashing into the water between two longships. "I am of a mind to shout my nuncle's name."

"Which uncle" he demanded. "You have three."

"Four," she said. "Nuncle, hear me out. No king can rule alone. Even when the dragons sat the Iron Throne, they had men to help them. They called them Hands. I will place the driftwood crown upon your brow myself . . . if you will name me your Hand."

No King of the Isles had ever had a Hand, much less one who was a woman. The notion made Victarion uncomfortable. *Men would mock me in their cups.* "Why would you wish this?"

"To end this war, before this war ends us. We have won all that we are like to win . . . and will lose all just as quick, unless we make a peace. I have shown Lady Bolton every courtesy, and she swears her lord will treat with me. If we yield Deepwood Motte, Torrhen's Square, and Moat Cailin, she says, the northmen will cede us Sea Dragon Point and all the Stony Shore between there and Flint's Finger. Those lands are thinly peopled, yet ten times larger than all the isles put together. An exchange of hostages to seal the pact, and each side agrees to make common cause with the other should the Iron Throne—"

Victarion chuckled. "This Lady Bolton plays you for a fool, niece. Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore are ours . . . as are Deepwood, Moat Cailin, and all the rest. Winterfell is burnt and broken, and the Young Wolf rots headless in the earth. We will have all the north, as your lord father dreamed."

"When longships learn to row through trees, we will. A fisherman may hook a grey leviathan, but if he does not cut it loose it will drag him down to death. The north is too large for us to hold, and too full of northmen."

"Go back to your dolls, niece. Leave the winning of wars to men." Victarion made two fists, and showed them to her. "I have two hands. No man needs three."

"I know a man who needs House Harlaw, though."

"Hotho Humpback has offered me his daughter for my queen. If I take her, I will have the Harlaws."

That seemed to take the girl aback. "Rodrik is Lord Harlaw. Hotho's liege lord."

"Rodrik has no daughters, only books. Hotho will be his heir, and I will be the king." Once he had said the words aloud, they sounded true. "The Crow's Eye has been too long away."

"Some men look larger at a distance," Asha warned. "Walk amongst the cookfires if you dare, and listen. They are not telling tales of your strength, nor of my famous beauty. They talk only of the Crow's Eye . . . the far places he has seen, the women he has bedded and the men he's killed, the cities he has sacked, the way he burnt Lord Tywin's fleet at Lannisport . . ."

All along the strand the longships rested, tall masts **rising like a forest from the surf.**

"I burnt the lion's fleet," Victarion insisted. "With mine own hands I flung the first torch onto his flagship."

"The Crow's Eye hatched the scheme." Asha put her hand upon his arm. "And killed your wife as well . . . did he not?"

Balon had commanded them not to speak of it, but Balon was dead. "He put a baby in her belly and made me do the killing. I would have killed him too, but Balon would have no kinslaying in his hall. He sent Euron into exile, never to return . . ."

"I would have killed him too, but Balon would have no kinslaying in his hall. He sent Euron into exile, never to return . . ."

" . . . so long as Balon lived." Asha frowned.

Victarion looked at his fists. "She gave me horns. I had no choice." *Had it been known men would have laughed at me, as the Crow's Eye laughed when I confronted him. 'She came to me wet and willing,'* he boasted. *'It seems Victarion is big everywhere but where it matters.'* But he could not tell her that.

"I am sorry for you," said Asha, "and sorrier for her . . . but you leave me small choice but to claim the Seastone Chair myself."

You cannot. "Your breath is yours to waste, woman."

"It is," she said, and left him.

THE PRIEST

Only when his arms and legs were numb from the cold did Aeron Greyjoy struggle back to shore and don his robes again

He had run before the Crow's Eye as if he were still the weak thing he had been, but when the waves broke over his head they reminded once more that that man was dead. *I was reborn from the sea, a harder man and stronger.* No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could, nor the bones of his soul, the grey and grisly bones of his soul. *The sound of a door opening, the scream of a rusted iron hinge.*

The priest's robes crackled as he pulled them down, still stiff with salt from their last washing a fortnight past. The wool clung to his wet chest, drinking the brine that ran down from his hair. He filled his waterskin and slung it over his shoulder.

As he strode across the strand, a drowned man returning from a call of nature stumbled into him in the darkness. "Damphair," he murmured. Aeron laid a hand upon his head, blessed him, and moved on. The ground rose beneath his feet, gently at first, then more steeply. When he felt scrub grass between his toes, he knew that he had left the strand behind. Slowly he climbed, listening to the waves. *The sea is never weary. I must be as tireless.*

On the crown of the hill four-and-forty monstrous stone ribs rose from the earth like the trunks of great pale trees. The sight made Aeron's heart beat faster. Nagga had been the first sea dragon, the mightiest ever to rise from the waves. She fed on krakens and leviathans and drowned whole islands in her wrath, yet the Grey King had slain her and the Drowned God had changed her bones to stone so that men might never cease to wonder at the courage of the first of kings. Nagga's ribs became the beams and pillars of his longhall, just as her jaws became his throne. *For a thousand years and seven he reigned here,* Aeron recalled. *Here he took his mermaid wife and planned his wars against the Storm God. From here he ruled both stone and salt, wearing robes of woven seaweed and a tall pale crown made from Nagga's teeth.*

But that was in the dawn of days, when mighty men still dwelt on earth and sea. The hall had been warmed by Nagga's living fire, which the Grey King had made his thrall. On its walls hung tapestries woven from silver seaweed most pleasing to the eyes. The Grey King's warriors had feasted on the bounty of the sea at a table in the shape of a great starfish, whilst seated upon thrones carved from mother-of-pearl. *Gone, all the glory gone.* Men were smaller now. Their lives had grown short. The Storm God drowned Nagga's fire after the Grey King's death, the chairs and tapestries had been stolen, the roof and walls had rotted away. Even the Grey King's great throne of fangs had been swallowed by the sea. Only Nagga's bones endured to remind the ironborn of all the wonder that had been.

It is enough, thought Aeron Greyjoy.

Nine wide steps had been hewn from the stony hilltop. Behind rose the howling hills of Old Wyk, with mountains in the distance black and cruel. Aeron paused where the doors once stood, pulled the cork from his waterskin, took a swallow of salt water, and turned to face the sea. *We were born from the sea, and to the sea we must return.* Even here he could hear the ceaseless rumble of the waves, and feel the power of the god who lurked below the waters. Aeron went to his knees. *You have sent your people to me,* he prayed. *They have left their halls and hovels, their castles and their keeps, and come here to Nagga's bones, from every fishing village and every hidden vale. Now grant to them the wisdom to know the true king when he stands before them, and the strength to shun the false.* All night he prayed, for when the god was in him Aeron Greyjoy had no need of sleep, no more than the waves did, nor the fishes of the sea.

Dark clouds ran before the wind as the first light stole into the world. The black sky went grey as slate; the black sea turned grey-green; the black mountains of Great Wyk across the bay put on the blue-green hues of soldier pines. As color stole back into the world, a hundred banners lifted and began to flap. Aeron beheld the silver fish of Botley, the bloody moon of Wynch, the dark green trees of Orkwood. He saw warhorns and leviathans and scythes, and everywhere the krakens great and golden. Beneath them, thralls and salt wives begin to move about, stirring coals into new life and gutting fish for the captains and the kings to break their fasts. The dawn light touched the stony strand, and he watched men wake from sleep, throwing aside their sealskin blankets as they called for their first horn of ale. *Drink deep,* he thought, *for we have god's work to do today.*

The sea was stirring too. The waves grew larger as the wind rose, sending plumes of spray to crash against the

longships. *The Drowned God wakes,* thought Aeron. He could hear his voice welling from the depths of the sea. *I shall be with you here this day, my strong and faithful servant,* the voice said. *No godless man will sit my Seastone Chair.*

It was there beneath the arch of Nagga's ribs that his drowned men found him, standing tall and stern with his long black hair blowing in the wind. "Is it time?" Rus asked. Aeron gave a nod and said, "It is. Go forth, and sound the summons."

The drowned men took up their driftwood cudgels and began to beat them one against the other as they walked back down the hill. Others joined them, and the clangor spread along the strand. Such a fearful clacking and a clattering it made, as if a hundred trees were pummeling one another with their limbs. Kettledrums began to beat as well, *boom-boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom.* A warhorn bellowed, then another. *AAAAAAooooooooooooooooooooooo.*

Men left their fires to make their way toward the bones of the Grey King's hall; oarsmen, steersmen, sailmakers, shipwrights, the warriors with their axes and the fishermen with their nets. Some had thralls to serve them; some had salt wives. Others, who had sailed too often to the green lands, were attended by maesters and singers and knights. The common men crowded together in a crescent around the base of the knoll, with the thralls, children, and women toward the rear. The captains and the kings made their way up the slopes. Aeron Damphair saw cheerful Sigfry Stonetree, Andrik the Unsmiling, the knight Ser Harras Harlaw. Lord Baelor Blacktyde in his sable cloak stood beside The Stonehouse in ragged sealskin. Victarion loomed above all of them save Andrik. His brother wore no helm, but elsewise he was all in armor, his kraken cloak hanging golden from his shoulders. *He shall be our king. What man could look on him and doubt it?*

When the Damphair raised his bony hands the kettledrums and the warhorns fell silent, the drowned men lowered their cudgels, and all the voices stilled. Only the sound of the waves pounding remained, a roar no man could still. "We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return," Aeron began, softly at first, so men would strain to hear. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, yet now he feasts beneath the waves in the Drowned God's watery halls." He lifted his eyes to the sky. *"Balon is dead! The iron king is dead!"*

"The king is dead!" his drowned men shouted.

"Yet what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!" he reminded them. "Balon has fallen, Balon my brother, who honored the Old Way and paid the iron price. Balon the Brave, Balon the Blessed, Balon Twice-Crowned, who won us back our freedoms and our god. Balon is dead . . . but an iron king shall rise again, to sit upon the Seastone Chair and rule the isles."

"A king shall rise!" they answered. *"He shall rise!"*

"He shall. He must." Aeron's voice thundered like the waves. "But who? Who shall sit in Balon's place? Who shall rule these holy isles? Is he here among us now?" The priest spread his hands wide. *"Who shall be king over us?"*

A seagull screamed back at him. The crowd began to stir, like men waking from a dream. Each man looked at his neighbors, to see which of them might presume to claim a crown. *The Crow's Eye was never patient,* Aeron Damphair told himself. *Mayhaps he will speak first.* If so, it would be his undoing. The captains and the kings had come a long way to this feast, and would not choose the first dish set before them. *They will want to taste and sample, a bite of him, a nibble of the other, until they find the one that suits them best.*

Euron must have known that as well. He stood with his arms crossed amongst his mutes and monsters. Only the wind and the waves answered Aeron's call.

"The ironborn must have a king," the priest insisted, after a long silence. "I ask again. *Who shall be king over us?"*

"I will," came the answer from below.

At once a ragged cry of "Gylbert! Gylbert King!" went up. The captains gave way to let the claimant and his champions ascend the hill to stand at Aeron's side beneath the ribs of Nagga.

This would-be king was a tall spare lord with a melancholy visage, his lantern jaw shaved clean. His three champions took up their position two steps below him, bearing his sword and shield and banner. They shared a certain look with the tall lord, and Aeron took them for his sons. One unfurled his banner, a great black longship against a setting sun. "I am Gylbert Farwynd, Lord of the Lonely Light," the lord told the kingsmoot.

Aeron knew some Farwynds, a queer folk who held lands on westernmost shores of Great Wyk and the scattered isles beyond, rocks so small that most could support but a single household. Of those, the Lonely Light was the most distant, eight days sail to the northwest amongst rookeries of seals and sea lions and the boundless grey oceans. The Farwynds there were even queerer than the rest. Some said they were skinchangers, unholy creatures who could take on the forms of sea lions, walrus, even spotted whales, the wolves of the wild sea.

Lord Gylbert began to speak. He told of a **wondrous land beyond the Sunset Sea**, a land without winter or want.

Lord Gylbert began to speak. He told of a wondrous land beyond the Sunset Sea, a land without winter or want where death had no dominion. "Make me your king, and I shall lead you there," he cried. "We will build ten thousand ships as Nymeria once did, and take sail with all our people to the land beyond the sunset. There every man shall be a king, and every wife a queen."

His eyes, Aeron saw, were now grey, now blue, as changeable as the seas. *Mad eyes,* he thought, *fool's eyes.* The vision he spoke of was doubtless a snare set by the Storm God to lure the ironborn to destruction. The offerings that his men spilled out before the kingsmoot included sealskins and walrus tusks, arm rings made of whalebone,

warhorns banded in bronze. The captains looked and turned away, leaving lesser men to help themselves to the gifts. When the fool was done talking and his champions began to shout his name, only the Farwynds took up the cry, and not even all of them. Soon enough the cries of "Gylbert! Gylbert King!" faded away to silence. The gull screamed loudly above them, and landed atop one of Nagga's ribs as the Lord of the Lonely Light made his way back down the hill.

Aeron Damphair stepped forward once more. "I ask again. *Who shall be king over us?"*

"Me!" a deep voice boomed, and once more the crowd parted.

The speaker was borne up the hill in a carved driftwood chair carried on the shoulders of his grandsons. A great ruin of a man, twenty stones heavy and ninety years old, he was cloaked in a white bearskin. His own hair was snow white as well, and his huge beard covered him like a blanket from cheeks to thighs, so it was hard to tell where the beard ended and the pelt began. Though his grandsons were great strapping men, they struggled with his weight on the steep stone steps. Before the Grey King's hall they set him down, and three remained below him as his champions.

Sixty years ago, this one might well have won the favor of the moot, Aeron thought, *but his hour is long past.*

"Aye, me!" the man roared from where he sat, in a voice as huge as he was. "Why not? Who better? I am Erik Ironmaker, for them who's blind. Erik the Just. Erik Anvil-Breaker. Show them my hammer, Thormor." One of his champions lifted it up for all to see; a monstrous thing it was, its haft wrapped in old leather, its head a brick of steel as large as a loaf of bread. "I can't count how many hands I've smashed to pulp with that hammer," Erik said, "but might be some thief could tell you. I can't say how many heads I've crushed against my anvil neither, but there's some widows could. I could tell you all the deeds I've done in battle, but I'm eight-and-eighty and won't live long enough to finish. If old is wise, no one is wiser than me. If big is strong, no one's stronger. You want a king with heirs? I've more'n I can count. King Erik, aye, I like the sound o' that. Come, say it with me. *ERIK! ERIK ANVIL-BREAKER! ERIK KING!"*

As his grandsons took up the cry, their own sons came forward with chests upon their shoulders. When they upended them at the base of the stone steps, a torrent of silver, bronze, and steel spilled forth; arm rings, collars, daggers, dirks, and throwing axes. A few captains snatched up the choicest items, and added their voices to the swelling chant. But no sooner had the cry begun to build than a woman's voice cut through it. *"Erik!"* Men moved aside to let her through. With one foot on the lowest step, she said, "Erik, stand up."

A hush fell. The wind blew, waves broke against the shore, men murmurred in each other's ears. Erik Ironmaker stared down at Asha Greyjoy. "Girl. Thrice-damned girl. What did you say?"

"Stand up, Erik," she called. "Stand up and I'll shout your name with all the rest. Stand up and I'll be the first to follow you. You want a crown, aye. Stand up and take it."

Elsewhere in the press, the Crow's Eye laughed. Erik glared at him. The big man's hands closed tight around the arms of his driftwood throne. His face went red, then purple. His arms trembled with effort. Aeron could see a thick blue vein pulsing in his neck as he struggled to rise. For a moment it seemed as though he might do it, but the breath went out of him all at once, and he groaned and sank back onto his cushion. Euron laughed all the louder. The big man hung his head and grew old, all in the blink of an eye. His grandsons carried him back down the hill.

"Who shall rule the ironborn?" Aeron Damphair called again. "Who shall be king over us?"

Men looked at one another. Some looked at Euron, some at Victarion, a few at Asha. Waves broke green and white against the longships. The gull cried once more, a raucous scream, forlorn. "Make your claim, Victarion," The Merlyn called. "Let us have done with this mummer's farce."

"When I am ready," Victarion shouted back.

Aeron was pleased. *It is better if he waits.*

The Drumm came next, another old man, though not so old as Erik. He climbed the hill on his own two legs, and on his hip rode Red Rain, his famous sword, forged of Valyrian steel in the days before the Doom. His champions were men of note: his sons Denys and Donnel, both stout fighters, and between them Andrik the Unsmiling, a giant of a man with arms as thick as trees. It spoke well of The Drumm that such a man would stand for him.

"Where is it written that our king must be a kraken?" Drumm began. "What right has Pyke to rule us? Great Wyk is the largest isle, Harlaw the richest, Old Wyk the most holy. When the black line was consumed by dragonfire, the ironborn gave the primacy to Vickon Greyjoy, aye . . . but as *lord,* not king"

It was a good beginning. Aeron heard shouts of approval, but they dwindled as the old man began to tell of the glory of the Drumms. He spoke of Dale the Dread, Roryn the Reaver, the hundred sons of Gormond Drumm the Oldfather. He drew Red Rain and told them how Hilmar Drumm the Cunning had won the blade from a armored knight with wits and a wooden cudgel. He spoke of ships long lost and battles eight hundred years forgotten, and the crowd grew restive. He spoke and spoke, and then he spoke still more.

And when Drumm's chests were thrown open, the captains saw the niggard's gifts he'd brought them. *No throne was ever bought with bronze,* the Damphair thought. The truth of that was plain to hear, as the cries of *"Drumm! Drumm! Dunstan King!"* died away.

Aeron could feel a tightness in his belly, and it seemed to him that the waves were pounding louder than before. *It is time,* he thought. *It is time for Victarion to make his claim.* "Who shall be king over us?" the priest cried once more, but this time his fierce black eyes found his brother in the crowd. "Nine sons were born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy. One was mightier than all the rest, and knew no fear."

Victarion met his eyes, and nodded. The captains parted before him as he climbed the steps. "Brother, give me blessing," he said when he reached the top. He knelt and bowed his head. Aeron uncorked his waterskin and poured a stream of seawater down upon his brow. *"What is dead can never die,"* the priest said, and

Victarion replied, *"but rises again, harder and stronger."*

When Victarion rose, his champions arrayed themselves beneath him; Rafe the Limper, Red Rafe Stonehouse, and Nute the Barber, noted warriors all. Stonehouse bore the Greyjoy banner; the golden kraken on a field as black as the midnight sea. As soon as it unfurled, the captains and the kings began to shout out the Lord Captain's name. Victarion waited till they quieted, then said, "You all know me. If you want sweet words, look elsewhere. I have no singer's tongue. I have an axe, and I have these." He raised his huge mailed hands up to show them, and Nute the Barber displayed his axe, a fearsome piece of steel. "I was a loyal brother," Victarion went on. "When Balon was wed, it was me he sent to Harlaw to bring him back his bride. I led his longships into many a battle, and never lost but one. The first time Balon took a crown, it was me sailed into Lannisport to singe the lion's tail. The second time, it was me he sent to skin the Young Wolf should he come howling home. All you'll get from me is more of what you got from Balon. That's all I have to say."

With that his champions began to chant: *"VICTARION! VICTARION! VICTARION KING!"* Below, his men were spilling out his chests, a cascade of silver, gold, and gems, a wealth of plunder. Captains scrambled to seize the richest pieces, shouting as they did so. *"VICTARION! VICTARION! VICTARION KING!"* Aeron watched the Crow's Eye. *Will he speak now, or let the kingsmoot run its course?* Orkwood of Orkmont was whispering in Euron's ear.

But it was not Euron who put an end to the shouting, it was the thrice-damned *woman.* She put two fingers in her mouth and *whistled,* a sharp shrill sound that cut through the tumult like a knife through curds. "Nuncle! *Nuncle!"* Bending, she snatched up a twisted golden collar, and bounded up the steps. Nute seized her by the arm, and for half a heartbeat Aeron was hopeful that his brother's champions would keep the foolish girl silent, but Asha wrenched free of the Barber's hand and said something to Red Ralf that made him step aside. As she pushed past them, the cheering died away. She was Balon Greyjoy's daughter, and the crowd was curious to hear what she would say.

"It was good of you to bring such gifts to my queensmoot, nuncle," she said to Victarion, "but you need not have worn so much armor. I promise not to hurt you." Guffaws sounded, as Asha turned to face the captains. "There's no one braver than my nuncle, no one stronger, no one fiercer in a fight. And he counts to ten as quick as any man, I have seen him do it . . . though when he needs to go to twenty he does take off his boots." That made them laugh again. "He has no sons, though. His wives keep dying. The Crow's Eye is his elder and has a better claim . . ."

"He does!" the Red Oarsman shouted from below.

"Ah, but my claim is better still." Asha set the collar on her head at a jaunty angle, so the gold gleamed against her dark hair. "Balon's brother cannot come before Balon's son!"

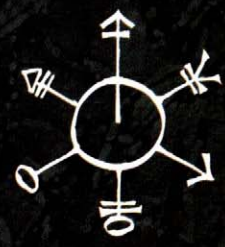
"Balon's sons are dead," cried Rafe the Limper. "All I see is Balon's little daughter!"

"Daughter?" Asha slipped a hand beneath her jerkin. "Oho! What's this? Shall I show you? Some of you have not seen one since they weaned you." They laughed again. "Teats on a king are a terrible thing, is that the song? Rafe, you have me, I am a woman . . . though not an old woman like you. Rafe the Limper . . . shouldn't that be Rafe the Limp?" Asha drew a dirk from between her breasts. "I'm a mother too, and here's my suckling babe!" She held it up. "And here, my champions." They pushed past Victarion's three to stand below her: Qarl the Maid, Tristifer Botley, and the knight Ser Harras Harlaw, whose sword Nightfall was as storied as Dunstan Drumm's Red Rain. "My nuncle said you know him. You know me too—"

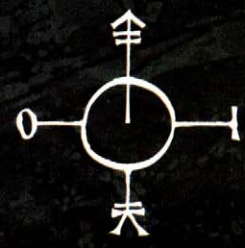
"I want to know you better!" someone shouted.

"Go home and know your wife," Asha shot back. "Nuncle says he'll give you more of what my father gave you. Well, what was that? Gold and glory, some will say. *Freedom,* ever sweet. Aye, it's so, he gave us that . . . and widows too, as Lord Blacktyde will tell you. How many of you had your homes put to the torch when Robert came? How many had daughters raped and despoiled? Burnt towns and broken castles, my father gave you that. *Defeat* was what he gave you. Nuncle here will give you more. Not me."

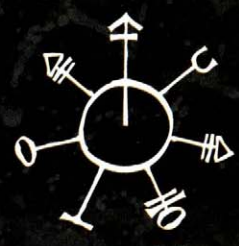
You've defeated
DUNGEONS.



You've slain
DRAGONS.



You've become a
HERO.



YOU'RE NOT READY...

"What will you give us?" asked Lucas Codd. "Knitting?"

"Aye, Lucas. I'll knit us all a kingdom." She tossed her dirk from hand to hand. "We need to take a lesson from the Young Wolf, who won every battle . . . and lost all."

"A wolf is not a kraken," Victarion objected. "What the kraken grasps it does not loose, be it longship or leviathan."

"And what *have* we grasped, nuncle? The north? What is that, but leagues and leagues of leagues and leagues, far from the sound of the sea? We have taken Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, Torrhen's Square, even *Winterfell.* What do we have to show for it?" She beckoned, and her *Black Wind* men pushed forward, chests of oak and iron on their shoulders. "I give you the wealth of the Stony Shore," Asha said as the first was upended. An avalanche of pebbles clattered forth, cascading down the steps; pebbles grey and black and white, worn smooth by the sea. "I give you the riches of Deepwood," she said, as the second chest was opened. Pinecones came pouring out, to roll and bounce down into the crowd. "And last, the gold of Winterfell." From the third chest came yellow turnips, round and hard and big as man's head. They landed amidst the pebbles and the pinecones. Asha stabbed one with her dirk. "Harmund Sharp," she shouted, "your son Harrag died at Winterfell, for this." She pulled the turnip off her blade and tossed it to him. "You have other sons, I think. If you'd trade their lives for turnips, shout my nuncle's name!"

"And if I shout *your* name?" Harmund demanded. "What then?"

"Peace," said Asha. "Land. Victory. I'll give you Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore, black earth and tall trees and stones enough for every younger son to build a hall. We'll have the northmen too . . . as friends, to stand beside us against the Iron Throne. So the choice is simple. Crown me, for peace and victory. Or crown my nuncle, for more war and more defeat." She sheathed her dirk again. "What will you have, ironmen?"

"VICTORY!" shouted Rodrik the Reader, his hands cupped about his mouth. *"Victory, and Asha!"*

"ASHA!" Lord Baelor Blacktyde echoed. *"ASHA QUEEN!"*

Asha's own crew took up the cry. *"ASHA! ASHA! ASHA QUEEN!"* They stamped their feet and shook their fists and yelled as the Damphair listened in disbelief. *She would leave her father's work undone!* Yet Tristifer Botley was shouting for her, with many Harlaws, some Goodbrothers, red-faced Lord Merlyn, more men than the priest would ever have believed . . . for a *woman!*

A crow can espy death from afar, and I say that all of Westeros is dying. Those who follow me will feast until the end of their days.

But others were holding their tongues, or muttering asides to their neighbors. *"No craven's peace!"* Ralf the Limper roared. Red Ralf Stonehouse swirled the Greyjoy banner and bellowed, *"Victarion! VICTARION! VICTARION!"* Men began to shove at one another. Someone flung a pinecone at Asha's head. When she ducked, her makeshift crown fell off. For a moment it seemed to the priest as if he stood atop a giant anthill, with a thousand ants in a boil at his feet. Shouts of *"Asha!"* and *"Victarion!"* surged back and froth, and it seemed as though some savage storm was about to engulf them all. *The Storm God is amongst us,* the priest thought, *sowing fury and discord.*

Sharp as a swordthrust, the sound of a horn split the air.

Bright and baneful was its voice, a shivering hot scream that made a man's bones seem to thrum within him. The cry lingered in the damp sea air: *aaaaRREEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

All eyes turned toward the sound. It was one of Euron's mongrels winding the call, a monstrous man with a shaved head. Rings of gold and jade and jet glistened on his arms, and on his broad chest was tattooed some bird of prey, talons dripping blood. *aaaaRRREEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

The horn he blew was shiny black and twisted, and taller than a man as he held it with both hands. It was bound about with bands of red gold and dark steel, incised with ancient Valyrian glyphs that seemed to glow redly as the sound swelled. *aaaaaaaRRREEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

It was a terrible sound, a wail of pain and fury that seemed to burn the ears. Aeron Damphair covered his, and prayed for the Drowned God to raise a mighty wave and smash the horn to silence, yet still the shriek went on and on. *It is the horn of hell,* he wanted to scream, though no man would have heard him. The cheeks of the tattooed man were so puffed out they looked about to burst, and the muscles in his chest twitched in a way that it made it seem as if the bird were about to rip free of his flesh and take wing. And now the glyphs were burning brightly, every line and letter shimmering with white fire. On and on and on the sound went, echoing amongst the howling hills behind them and across the waters of Nagga's Cradle to ring against the mountains of Great Wyk, on and on and on until it filled the whole wet world.

And when it seemed the sound would never end, it did.

The hornblower's breath failed at last. He staggered and almost fell. The priest saw Orkwood of Orkmont catch him by one arm to hold him up, whilst Left-Hand Lucas Codd took the twisted black horn from his hands. A thin wisp of smoke was rising from the horn, and the priest saw blood and blisters upon the lips of the man who'd sounded it. The bird on his chest was bleeding too. Euron Greyjoy climbed the hill slowly, with every eye upon him. Above the gull screamed and screamed again. *No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair,* Aeron thought, but he knew that he must let his brother speak. His lips moved silently in prayer.

Asha's champions stepped aside, and Victarion's as well. The priest took a step backward, and put one hand upon the cold rough stone of Nagga's ribs. The Crow's Eye stopped atop the steps, at the doors of the Grey King's hall, and turned his smiling eye upon the captains and the kings, but Aeron could feel his other eye as well, the one that he kept hidden.

"IRONMEN," said Euron Greyjoy, "you have heard my horn. Now hear my words. I am Balon's brother, Quellon's eldest living son. Lord Vickon's blood is in my veins, and the blood of the Old Kraken. Yet I have sailed further than any of them. Only one living kraken has never known defeat. Only one has never bent his knee. Only one has sailed to Asshai by the Shadow, and seen wonders and terrors beyond imagining . . ."

"If you liked the Shadow so well, go back there," called out bar-cheeked Qarl the Maid, one of Asha's champions.

The Crow's Eye ignored him. "My little brother would finish Balon's war, and claim the north. My sweet niece would give us peace and pinecones." His blue lips twisted in a smile. "Asha prefers victory to defeat. Victarion wants a kingdom, not a few scant yards of earth. From me, you shall have both.

"Crow's Eye, you call me. Well, who has a keener eye than the crow? After every battle the crows come in their hundreds and their thousands to feast upon the fallen. A crow can espy death from afar. And I say that all of Westeros is dying. Those who follow me will feast until the end of their days.

"We are the ironborn, and once we were conquerers. Our writ ran everywhere the sound of the waves was heard. My brother would have you be content with the cold and dismal north, my niece with even less . . . but I shall give you Lannisport. Highgarden. The Arbor. Oldtown. The riverlands and the Reach, the kingswood and the rainwood, Dorne and the marches, the Mountains of the Moon and the Vale of Arryn, Tarth and the Stepstones. I say we take it *all!* I say, we take *Westeros."* He glanced at the priest. "All for the greater glory of our Drowned God, to be sure."

For half a heartbeat even Aeron was swept away by the boldness of his words. The priest had dreamed the same dream, when first he'd seen the red comet in the sky. *We shall sweep over the green lands with fire and sword, root out the seven gods of he septons and the white trees of the northmen . . .*

"Crow's Eye," Asha called, "did you leave your wits at Asshai? If we cannot hold the north—and we cannot—how can we win the whole of the Seven Kingdoms?"

"Why, it has been done before. Did Balon teach his girl so little of the ways of war? Victarion, our brother's daughter has never heard of Aegon the Conquerer, it would seem."

"Aegon?" Victarion crossed his arms against his armored chest. "What has the Conquerer to do with us?"

"I know as much of war as you do, Crow's Eye," Asha said. "Aegon Targaryen conquered Westeros with *dragons."*

"And so shall we," Euron Greyjoy promised. "That horn you heard I found amongst the smoking ruins that were Valyria, where no man has dared to walk but me. You heard its call, and felt its power. It is a dragon horn, bound with bands of red gold and Valyrian steel graven with enchantments. The dragonlords of old sounded such horns, before the Doom devoured them. With this horn, ironmen, I can bind *dragons* to my will."

Asha laughed aloud. "A horn to bind goats to your will would be of more use, Crow's Eye. There are no more dragons."

"Again, girl, you are wrong. There are three, and I know where to find them. Surely that is worth a driftwood crown."

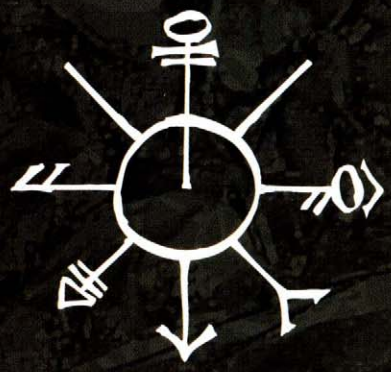
"EURON!" shouted Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

"EURON! CROW'S EYE! EURON!" cried the Red Oarsman.

But then it was Hotho Harlaw the priest heard, and Gorold Goodbrother, and Erik Anvi-Breaker. *"EURON! EURON! EURON!"* The cry spread and swelled, became a roar. *"EURON! EURON! CROW'S EYE! EURON KING!"* As loud as thunder, it rolled up Nagga's hill, like the Storm God rattling the clouds. *"EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON!"*

Even a priest may doubt. Even a prophet may know terror. Aeron Damphair reached within himself for his god, and discovered only silence. As a thousand voices shouted out his brother's name, all he could hear was the scream of a rusted iron hinge. D

They're coming.



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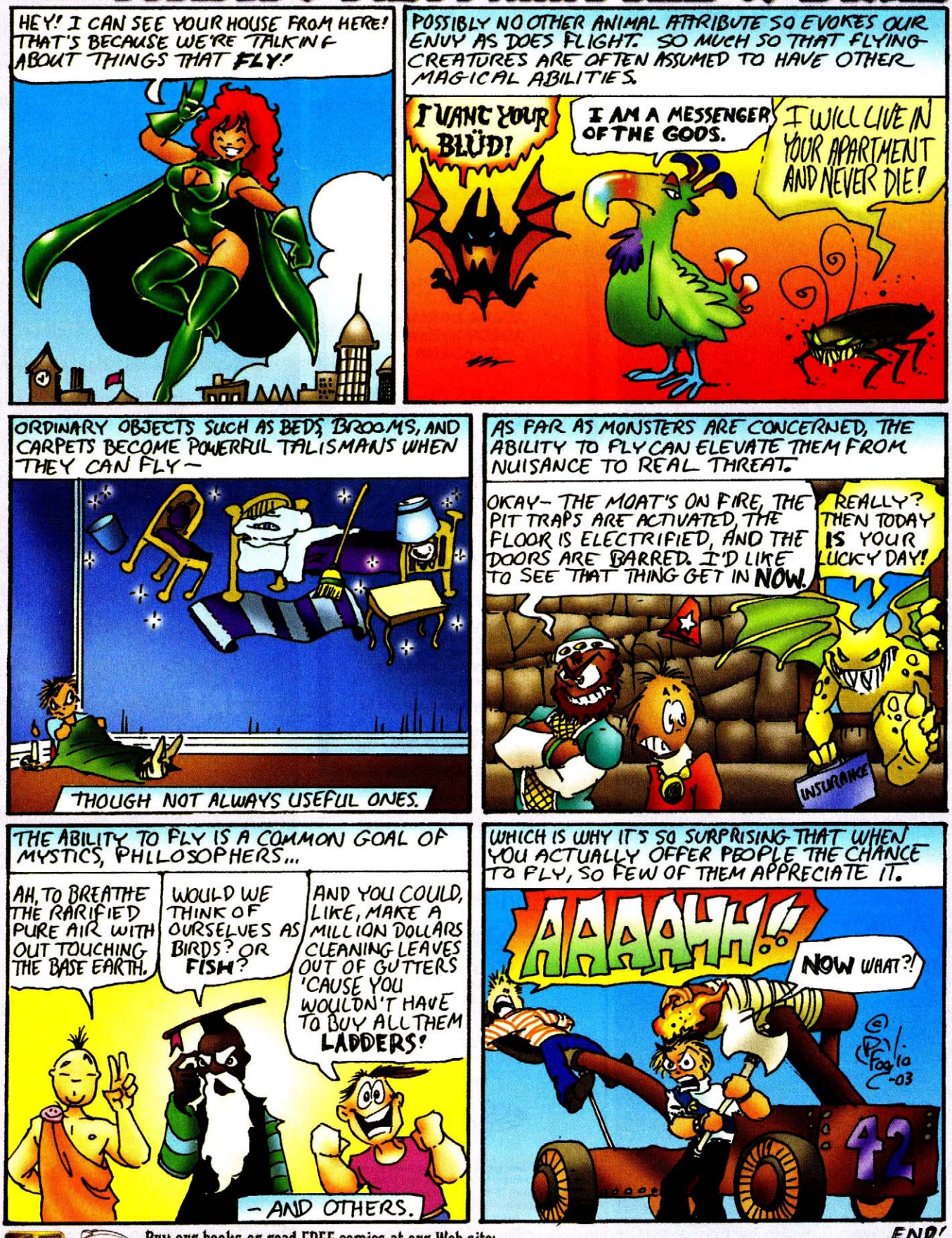
HEY! I CAN SEE YOUR HOUSE FROM HERE! THAT'S BECAUSE WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THINGS THAT FLY!
POSSIBLY NO OTHER ANIMAL ATTRIBUTE SO EVOKES OUR ENVY AS DOES FLIGHT. SO MUCH SO THAT FLYING CREATURES ARE OFTEN ASSUMED TO HAVE OTHER MAGICAL ABILITIES.
I VANT YOUR BLÜD!
I AM A MESSENGER OF THE GODS.
I WILL LIVE IN YOUR APARTMENT AND NEVER DIE!
ORDINARY OBJECTS SUCH AS BEDS, BROOMS, AND CARPETS BECOME POWERFUL TALISMANS WHEN THEY CAN FLY—
THOUGH NOT ALWAYS USEFUL ONES.
AS FAR AS MONSTERS ARE CONCERNED, THE ABILITY TO FLY CAN ELEVATE THEM FROM NUISANCE TO REAL THREAT.
OKAY— THE MOAT'S ON FIRE, THE PIT TRAPS ARE ACTIVATED, THE FLOOR IS ELECTRIFIED, AND THE DOORS ARE BARRED. I'D LIKE TO SEE THAT THING GET IN NOW.
REALLY? THEN TODAY IS YOUR LUCKY DAY!
INSURANCE
THE ABILITY TO FLY IS A COMMON GOAL OF MYSTICS, PHILOSOPHERS...
AH, TO BREATHE THE RARIFIED PURE AIR WITHOUT TOUCHING THE BASE EARTH.
WOULD WE THINK OF OURSELVES AS BIRDS? OR FISH?
AND YOU COULD, LIKE, MAKE A MILLION DOLLARS CLEANING LEAVES OUT OF GUTTERS 'CAUSE YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO BUY ALL THEM LADDERS!
—AND OTHERS.
WHICH IS WHY IT'S SO SURPRISING THAT WHEN YOU ACTUALLY OFFER PEOPLE THE CHANCE TO FLY, SO FEW OF THEM APPRECIATE IT.
AAAAHH!!
NOW WHAT?!
42
END!

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